LIFE AND DEATH

A Maithili novel exploring human dignity, social conscience, and moral continuity.

JEEVAN-MARAN

Original Maithili novel authored by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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An English Translation of the Maithili novel Jeevan-Maran
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

LIFE AND DEATH (Jeevan-Maran) is the English rendering of a philosophically nuanced Maithili novel by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, a writer distinguished by his quiet realism and moral introspection. Rather than presenting life and death as opposing absolutes, the novel situates them within the intimate textures of everyday existence, where family bonds, social responsibility, and inner conflict shape the deeper structure of human meaning.

Mandal does not rely on dramatic incident to generate intensity. Instead, significance emerges through conversation, memory, hesitation, and silence. The narrative moves with measured restraint between suffering and resilience, uncertainty and acceptance, revealing how individuals navigate illness, aging, duty, and emotional transition within the shared moral space of family and community.

Rural Mithila is not merely a setting but an ethical landscape, a living framework sustained by collective care, inherited memory, and intergenerational continuity. This translation preserves the reflective cadence of the original while offering clarity for a broader readership. Jeevan-Maran ultimately affirms human dignity, underscoring that life and death are not separate destinations but intertwined movements within a single, continuous human journey.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who view life not as a private possession but as a shared social inheritance, understood, lived, and shaped in community.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

Preface

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Life and death are often imagined as opposites, separated by an uncrossable distance. Yet lived experience rarely confirms such a divide. Within the steady rhythms of ordinary existence, death does not arrive as a stranger. It emerges from the same current that sustains life. It is not merely rupture, but culmination; not negation, but transformation. LIFE AND DEATH, originally written in Maithili as Jeevan-Maran by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, inhabits this continuum. The novel invites readers to move beyond binary thinking and recognise life and death as inseparable movements within a single moral journey.

Mandal's writing has long been defined by quiet realism. The phrase gains deeper resonance when considered alongside the breadth of his literary contribution as a novelist, poet, playwright, and storyteller. His acclaimed novel Pangu, honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award, brought his work to a wider national audience. Yet the recognition merely affirmed what Maithili readers already understood. Mandal writes from proximity rather than abstraction. His fiction draws strength from the textures of Mithila: fragile agriculture, shared courtyards, generational memory, caste tensions, aspirations for mobility, and the resilient dignity of labour.

His realism is grounded in restraint. He avoids

rhetorical excess and ideological display. Rather than constructing heroic archetypes or staging dramatic spectacle, he attends to vulnerability, hesitation, and the gradual formation of conscience. Beneath the simplicity of his language lies a disciplined moral intelligence. Social complexity is not proclaimed; it emerges through gesture and conversation.

In this novel, death enters quietly. A son–a doctor preparing for duty–moves through his routine. A daughter-in-law brings tea. An elderly father lies still. The absence of panic does not signal emotional emptiness; it reflects cultural composure and an internalised awareness of impermanence. When life is sustained within the fabric of community, death, too, is absorbed into that fabric. It is neither denied nor sensationalised, but received with dignity and shared presence.

From this domestic scene, the narrative expands outward. The deceased father belongs not only to a household but to a community shaped by memory and obligation. The son, Dr. Devanandan, inhabits a modern professional world governed by procedure and institutional logic. An electric crematorium offers efficiency and administrative order. Yet the father's life was rooted in the village, where rituals function as gestures of belonging rather than mechanical acts. The decision to return the body to the ancestral village becomes symbolic: identity cannot be detached from the soil that formed it.

The novel thus enters into a nuanced dialogue with modernity. It neither romanticises the village nor condemns the city; instead, it reveals their distinct ethical textures. Urban life operates through systems, while rural

life unfolds through relationships. In hospitals, birth and death are routine occurrences; in villages, they are shared passages. Mandal presents not opposition, but negotiation. Individuals move between inherited belonging and contemporary mobility. This tension reflects a broader condition of our age, in which displacement coexists with inward attachment.

A distinctive strength of the narrative lies in its intergenerational perspective. The grandmother, the son, the daughter-in-law, and the child inhabit different moral horizons. The child questions death with innocence. The daughter-in-law measures conduct against social expectation. The son struggles between professional responsibility and filial duty. The grandmother interprets loss through lived memory. Authority does not descend from a single centre; wisdom circulates among voices shaped by age, gender, and experience.

In this respect, the novel resonates with a postmodern sensibility. It unsettles fixed hierarchies and grand narratives without surrendering moral coherence. Truth emerges relationally–through conversation and reflection–rather than by decree. The educated doctor does not monopolise understanding; the grandmother's memory carries equal weight. Meaning arises within relationships, not from abstraction.

The doctor's reflections introduce another philosophical strand. He treats bodily illness, yet wonders whether society itself suffers from deeper afflictions such as envy, division, and the erosion of solidarity. Technological progress does not eliminate existential fragility. The novel asks quietly whether mastery over disease has been matched by care for communal bonds.

This inquiry unfolds through introspection rather than polemic.

The village is not portrayed as idyllic. It contains disputes, caste tensions, and legal conflicts. Yet even amid discord, mechanisms of collective engagement persist. When floodwaters rise or death occurs, people gather without summons. Community here is not the absence of struggle, but the refusal to withdraw from shared responsibility. Ethical solidarity survives imperfection.

In a global context marked by urbanisation, migration, and weakened intergenerational ties, this portrayal acquires broader resonance. Elders often live apart from their children. Professional ambition fragments families. Ritual continuity thins. The novel does not advocate nostalgia; instead, it asks what must be preserved if humanity is to remain intact. The old woman's insight that human beings are human before they are defined by role or caste gestures toward a universal ethic.

At its thematic core lies moral continuity. Life unfolds through obligations to parents, children, neighbours, and society. Death transforms but does not erase these bonds. The father's past generosity during floods returns as collective support at his funeral. Memory functions as a moral archive. Actions accumulate meaning over time.

The narrative also acknowledges vulnerability. The son anticipates a future in which his own children may live far away. Dependency is cyclical, extending from infancy to old age. Who will care for whom in an increasingly mobile world? The novel offers no sentimental answer; it invites sober reflection.

Translating this work for an English readership required careful attentiveness to tone. Much of its depth resides in silence, recollection, and understated exchange. Cultural practices such as cremation rites and village councils are embedded in lived context rather than presented through explanatory commentary. My effort has been to preserve the reflective cadence while ensuring clarity. Translation here is not substitution, but mediation between sensibilities.

Readers expecting dramatic turns will instead encounter a gradual unfolding. The narrative moves like a river that curves rather than crashes. Through stories of fairs, floods, and familial disputes, Mandal constructs a mosaic of social life. Death becomes the occasion through which life is reconsidered in its fullness.

Ultimately, LIFE AND DEATH is a meditation on dignity. Dignity does not arise from status or wealth; it arises from participation in a moral community. To live with dignity is to act responsibly. To die with dignity is to be returned, with respect, to one’s place of belonging. The father’s journey from hospital town to village orchard symbolises this return.

In offering this translation beyond its original linguistic boundaries, I remain conscious of the responsibility such mediation entails. What is rooted in the landscape of Mithila also speaks to universal concerns. Every society confronts mortality. Every society negotiates between continuity and change.

If this novel encourages even a brief pause for inward reflection, if it prompts reconsideration of ageing parents, shared memory, or communal duty, then its purpose will be fulfilled. Life and death are not

adversaries but companions moving along the arc of human continuity. In recognising that companionship, we recover not only perspective but humility.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh
Former Principal,
H.P.S. College, Nirmali,
B.N Mandal University,
Madhepura (Bihar)
Mob- +91 99316 63744

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At six in the morning, with duty beginning at daybreak, Dr. Devanandan rose from bed at five and, having completed his morning ablutions, was in the midst of dressing when his wife entered the room carrying tea. She placed the cup on the table and at once turned back towards her father-in-law’s room to serve him his tea.

Placing the cup beside him- she called softly- “Babu, Babu…”

Receiving no response, she brought her hand close to his nostrils to feel his breath. When she sensed none, a sudden thought rose within Shila: her own father had died after three months of illness. But this man had suffered nothing of the sort. Then why had his breath stopped?

Shila stood confused, caught between thoughts. She knew little herself, but her husband was a doctor. Day and night he dealt with ailments of flesh and blood; she could ask him. Then another thought checked her. He was about to leave for duty, a moment considered auspicious. How could she speak of something ominous at such a time? Yet her mind answered itself again. Duty is momentary; death is final. To weigh one against the other would be childish.

She left her father-in-law’s side at once and hurried

into her husband's room. Dr. Devanandan, having finished his tea, was preparing to step out. Seeing his wife agitated, he asked- "Did something occur to you?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"Then?"

"Babu has died. I shook him, held his arms, but his eyes did not open."

Hearing of his father's death, Devanandan did not panic. He said calmly- "Where is Mother?"

"She is asleep in her room. As always, I went first to give Babu his tea, and that is when I saw him."

"Let us go."

Saying this, Devanandan moved ahead. Shila turned towards the other room to wake her mother-in-law. Reaching there, she called out-

"Mother!"

At the sound of 'Mother', Subhadra stirred and sat up. Meanwhile, Shila brought tea. Subhadra rinsed her mouth with water from the pitcher kept nearby, then drank the tea. Devanandan called out to his wife. When Shila reached him, he said-

"Babu has died."

From her own room, Subhadra heard the words. At the mention of death, she rushed towards her husband.

Seeing her husband's lifeless body, Subhadra did not panic. Her thoughts turned inward, towards the span of her own life. It had been sixty years since the two of them were bound together and became companions in the play of the world. Before that bond, neither had spoken a word to the other. They had never met. Just as silently as they had come together, he had now departed without saying

anything. Yet would all that had been done together for sixty years also come to an end with this? Just as in earlier days the household had been full, with parents-in-law alive, so even now there was a son and a daughter-in-law. Then what was there to mourn?

With a faint smile, Subhadra looked towards her son. Just then Asha came hopping in and asked her mother- “Ma, has Baba died?”

Hearing Asha’s words, Subhadra replied- “Your Baba has gone to the village.”

Devanandan, standing before his father’s body, began to think. His father had belonged to a particular society, among whom he had lived his life. But my own society has become different now, he reflected. Therefore it would be right to take him back to his own society, leaving behind this one. To perform the rites of death here would not be appropriate. It would be better to do everything according to the customs of his own people. He said to Shila- “You three stay here. All the necessary arrangements will be made once we reach the village. I am going to make preparations.”

Coming out of the room and stepping onto the veranda, he saw the driver standing there. Doctor Devanandan said to him,

“We will not go to the hospital. Get the petrol tank filled and come back. We are going to the village.”

Without a word, the driver took the car and left.

Doctor Devanandan returned to the room and noted down his sons’ numbers on his mobile phone. The elder son was Dayanand and the younger Dharmanand. Dayanand was a fourth-year student; Dharmanand was in his first year. Both were studying at the same medical

college. Calling Dayanand, he said- “Son, your grandfather has died. Both of you should come to the village.”

On hearing the news of his grandfather’s death, Dayanand replied-

“Why should we go to the village for this? These days there are electric cremation facilities that take care of everything easily.”

Hearing Dayanand’s response, Devanandan said-

“Son, every living being has its own way of life. The life one lives is the life that brings one contentment. Look carefully. Even in sugar, worms thrive; worms also thrive in chillies and in bitter gourd. All three have different tastes. One is sweet, another bitter, the third sharply pungent. If a worm accustomed to sugar is placed in chillies or bitter gourd, it will naturally die. But can the worm that lives in chillies or bitter gourd survive in sugar? Never. Why would it die there? Has it moved from worse to better? No. It has lost the life it knew.

“In the same way, your grandfather lived his entire life in the village. It was sheer good fortune that your mother, after taking solemn vows, persuaded her father-in-law and mother-in-law to say ‘yes’, and that both of them came here a month ago. Even then, three days after arriving, he began to insist on returning to the village. Your mother held him back for a full month by making vow after vow. Otherwise, he would have left on the third day itself.”

Listening to his father, Dayanand said- “This is quite astonishing, Father.”

Seeing his son’s curiosity, Devanandan replied- “There is nothing astonishing in it. The village has another name: society. A society that does not exist in towns and

markets. There are bonds within society that people live by, what we call social bonds. Within those bonds lie duties of faith and shared responsibility, carried out together. In the city, this does not exist. Life there moves according to laws and regulations, where compassion and affection have no place. To listen every day to the lives of ten elderly people, to speak with them even for ten minutes, is something one grows accustomed to. How would that be possible here? Everyone here is consumed by his own concerns. Who has the time to hear another's joy or sorrow, his life or death? A person who eats well and fills his stomach with fine food may still find his mind uneasy if the soul finds no satisfaction."

Hearing this, Dayanand murmured in agreement and said-

"Even if we try, it will take at least three days to reach there. What will be done until then?"

"Even now in the village, there is the custom that as soon as life leaves the body, preparations for cremation begin. There is no practice of keeping the body waiting. Before you both arrive, the cremation will be done. And the rites themselves are never completed quickly. Somehow or other, they take at least fifteen days."

"Very well. We will catch the evening train and both come to the village."

After switching off the mobile phone, Devanandan began calculating silently. There would be work for at least fifteen days. Settlements and rituals would take additional time. Roughly twenty days would be needed. He began writing an application for at least twenty days of emergency leave.

Placing the application on the table, Devanandan

went to his father's room and said to his wife- "We will need twenty days in the village. Arrange everything accordingly. This is a time of duty, so we must go fully prepared."

Saying this, he sat down beside his mother. Shila rose and went to gather the necessary things. Subhadra's face showed not sorrow but a quiet overflow of contentment. She was immersed in a sea of thought. Somewhere within, a gentle happiness kept rising: had I died before him, the weight on my heart would have been unbearable. I would have kept wondering how he would spend the days left to him. But God had listened. Just as He had joined our hands, so too He had brought us across together. What do I lack now? He has left me in a garden so full, so tended, that there is no fear of being lost. Even by the measure of age, it has happened well. He was four years older.

Seeing his mother lost in thought, Devanandan called out-

"Mother..."

With a faint smile, Subhadra replied-

"My son, not even a trace of grief touches me. This is the law of creation. Why should there be sorrow in it?"

On the other side, Shila was arranging clothes and belongings, smiling inwardly as she worked. Whatever others may think, for me this is like bathing in seven sacred rivers at once. I have seen how my cousin behaved with bitterness at the moment of death. That never happened here. No one will raise finger against me regarding my behaviour.

Just then the driver sounded the horn outside. Hearing it, Devanandan said to his mother- "Mother, I will

return shortly."

Taking the leave application from the room, he asked the driver to deliver it to the office and come back. Then he returned and sat down beside his father's feet, waiting for the preparations to be completed.

His eyes rested on his mother. Not a single crease of gloom marked her face, he thought. Just as there are steps between the courtyard and the veranda of a house, so too are there stages within a family.

He recalled the story his father had once told of his parents' marriage, of how a new household had been formed and how the two of them together had brought his grandparents safely across the passage of life. In the same way, today, I too have stepped into that place. Why should Mother feel any sense of loss? All these years she lived sustained by Father's presence; now she has come to rest upon us, the two of us. Just as a wife becomes a husband's support and a husband a wife's hope, so when the husband is gone, that place is taken by the son.

His mind returned to the day his name had been written in the village school register. Wanting him to grow into a good human being, his father had lifted him onto his shoulders at the age of four, narrated stories of Lord Ram, and had his name enrolled. How had such love for learning arisen in a man with so little formal education? How is it that in the hearts of all parents Saraswati herself seems to reside? Social disorder and the neglect of authority often make such hopes impossible, and the compulsions of life push people into the dark cellars of survival. But that had not happened to me.

I studied up to lower primary in the village school. As soon as I passed, Father gave money to enrol me in

middle school. Four years later, I finished middle school. Then he bore the expense of high school, and after another four years, I passed out. Fortune again favoured me. At R. K. College in Madhubani, science studies had begun. Just as my own enthusiasm was fresh when I enrolled, so too was that of the newly appointed professors. By then, it is true, side doors and shortcuts had already opened in the education department. But it was not like today, when large vehicles pass effortlessly through. It was modest, limited, single-file. I was not an exceptional student, but neither was I hopeless. Had I been truly hopeless, how would I have passed? I never failed.

The idea of becoming a doctor had not even crossed my mind. My plan was to complete a B.Sc. and become a high-school teacher. Then the medical field gathered momentum. A hospital opened in Darbhanga, and medical studies began there as well. After passing I.Sc., friends spoke of enrolling in medical college. The thought came to me too. I told Father. The desire to study had always been there. He gave his consent without hesitation.

Families that led the village or owned extensive land were not inclined towards education and salaried work. Children from poor families, trapped in deprivation, often could not study. That advantage came to me. But now I understand that becoming a doctor meant leaving the village, leaving family and society behind. When I became a doctor, treating illness became my duty. But are there no illnesses, no patients, in the village?

Just as there is a boundary between sky and earth where birds and sparrows begin to tire, so too Devanandan’s mind began to falter. He could see neither

the road ahead nor turn back. His thoughts grew heavy, circling endlessly.

He raised his head and looked towards his mother. In her lap sat little Asha, absorbed in her own small world. His gaze moved from Asha to his two sons, then from his sons to the coming generation. Just as I became a doctor through the service of my parents, so too will these two become doctors through me. Yet the comforts and facilities that have led us to live separately from our parents will lead them too to live apart from us. But the body has its course: childhood, youth, old age. That path is for everyone. In childhood and in old age, everyone needs another. The one we call our own, whom we expect to serve us, may come to live thousands of miles away. Then how will care be given? If we truly considered the whole world as our own and served all alike, why would there be so much bloodshed, conflict, theft, deceit, looting, and violence?

In this strange moment, Devanandan felt unsteady. A thought rose within him: I am a doctor. There are countless doctors like me, spread from hospitals to cities, yet service itself is caught in the grip of caste and middlemen. One sees it clearly. Those without the backing of caste or brokers spend day and night calculating fees, while those without regional or caste support, despite having ability, are left struggling like fishermen casting nets in barren waters.

Another thought followed. When I first became a doctor, there were only a thermometer and a stethoscope. The condition of hospitals was much the same. Today, hospitals are filled with machines and instruments, and I have acquired many myself. Treatment has become easier, and is becoming easier still. But for

whom? Do people no longer die for want of medicines or medical care? Has everyone gained access to treatment? Does illness ask a person's consent before striking? If not, then I must understand my own limits and boundaries. If I fail to do so, I too will be destroyed, like insects and birds wiped out in scrub and wasteland. And if that is to happen, why exhaust the mind in such grinding thought? That poor land would lie fallow anyway, trampled and defiled, where children play and relieve themselves without thought.

Just then, a group of staff members and students arrived and asked- "Doctor Sahib, what should be done with the body?"

Raising his eyes and looking at their faces, Devanandan replied with a faint smile- "He will be cremated in the village. All the facilities exist here, but this would go against his way of thinking. I will not burden my head with conflict midway. He spent his entire life in the village and society. It is therefore my duty to take him back and return him to his society. Whatever is to be done for him will be done according to the society's understanding. If that is not done, we will become a thorn in its eyes. That is not what I want."

Hearing Devanandan's words, everyone fell silent. In the meantime, a group of senior doctors also arrived. Yet there was no trace of sorrow on anyone's face. Their mood was light. In a family, birth and death occur only at intervals; in a hospital, they occur every day.

Smiling, Doctor Krishnakant said to Devanandan- "Why stop the next steps? First we should phone the crematorium and make a booking. Then we can go according to whatever time we get. Hearing Doctor Krishnakant's suggestion, Devanandan remained silent.

His mind began to dance uneasily. He had already answered the staff and juniors. But what should he say here? If he cut off the discussion, it would cause hurt. These men had seen more of the world than he had. Keeping his thoughts to himself, Devanandan said quietly,

"I am a son. But Mother was his life's companion. It is essential to understand her view."

All strained their ears to hear Mother's words. Subhadra spoke calmly-

"This house and courtyard may now be ours, but they were made by the gods. What he made is in the village. His own orchard is there, his fields are there, inherited through generations. Where trees once withered and died, new ones have been planted in their place. Our forebears lie settled beneath the soil there, beneath those very trees. To leave that ground behind and consign him somewhere else does not feel right to me. This is not merely a question of cremation. It is about carrying out the final rites in their fullness. Month after month there will be ritual observances, the whole year will pass under their shadow. Year after year there will be memorial days, and beyond that the rites of Pitri Paksha as well."

Hearing Subhadra's thoughts, everyone fell silent. Just then the driver came and said-

"The car is ready."

At the driver's words, Devanandan went to change his clothes. After changing, he returned and prepared to place the body in the car. Everyone remained standing; together they lifted the body with their own hands and placed it inside. Once the body was settled, they too got in, and the journey to the village began.

As he sat in the car, Devanandan thought that, by the measure of age, his father's death had come at the proper time. A person grows old by eighty, and beyond that becomes truly worn. Just as ripened grain, once cut, does not scatter excessively, but when it becomes overripe it begins to crumble and fall at the slightest wind, so it is with the human body. When age advances too far, the organs begin to lose function, and all kinds of complications arise. As complications appear, illnesses of many kinds follow. It was good that, until now, Father had remained active in all his functions. Only the vital breath had left his body.

Perhaps Subhadra's quiet happiness came from knowing that her husband had not departed half-ripened, but fully matured, having lived his span.

As for Shila and Asha, their position was different. At most, they were executors of decisions, bound to carry out instructions. What stake did they have in the family's gains and losses? Until now, Shila had stood on the fourth step of the household; now she had moved to the third. And in Asha's heart there lingered the sense that she had no real claim in this family, nor would she ever have one. Like the steps between the house and the courtyard, meant only for passing through, moving out from home and returning again.

When Devanandan looked at his mother's face, he sensed that some earlier thought had resurfaced in her mind, casting a shadow of concern. A question stirred within him: how would this worry ever leave her heart?

A thought occurred to him that if someone else spoke, it would not ease his mother's concern. It was possible she would not even pay attention. It would be better, then, to ask her something directly, so that a new

thought might arise and the earlier one recede. When this idea came to him, he smiled and asked gently-

"Mother, when I am here, why should you be anxious?"

At the word "anxious", Subhadra replied-

"My son, an old memory surfaced, and that is why a little worry came over me."

In between, Shila spoke with affectionate teasing-

"Do old people still remember such old things?"

"Daughter-in-law," Subhadra said calmly, "you too will one day reach this age. That is why I say this. My grandmother used to say that just as people build earthen granaries to store grain safely for long periods, in the same way a person should build a granary within the mind for the deeds of one's life. First of all, Ganesh is shaped. Just as husk and chaff are separated from grain with a winnowing basket, so too the chaff of life's actions must be removed, and only the essence of one's deeds should be kept in memory."

As Subhadra spoke, Asha interrupted eagerly-

"What old story is it?"

Seeing Asha's face, old memories sprouted afresh within Subhadra. Smiling, she began-

"My little one, this is a tale from long ago. In our village, there were two communities, and a boy and a girl from them fell in love. From childhood, both used to go to the Jhanjharpur market with their parents. In the village, their customs and ways were entirely different. They did not eat together, nor celebrate festivals together. Yet the land they farmed was the same.

"The two of them grew vegetables and went to the

market to sell them. They would leave the village together and sit side by side in the market selling their produce. When their children grew a little more capable, they began bringing back a few items from the market. They would go together. When one goes with a companion, a child is less likely to get lost. From childhood, a meeting of minds began between the two of them. They laughed and joked with people like themselves, seeing and hearing the same things. Gradually, between the two, laughter and play took root. They became skilled not only at selling vegetables in the market but also at breaking clods, levelling fields, transplanting, and tending crops. A new world began to form for the two of them because they started lifting a little more than what their parents had managed, five or ten measures extra. As a result, both the family's work and income doubled. Then, in between, an incident occurred..."

Asha suddenly skipped forward and asked- "What happened?"

"My child," Subhadra continued, "whether it was truth or falsehood, God alone knows. But in the village, rumours began to circulate. Tension grew. Abuse and scuffles started here and there. All the village elders began speaking according to their own expectations. At times, tempers cooled, but most of the time they stayed heated. As for arbitration, there was not a single village left without one. The elders whispered among themselves, fixed a time for a council, and informed the fathers of both sides. The two young people stood firm. They replied that they would accept only a council that was impartial. That answer created another difficulty among the elders. Had it been a matter within one community, the arbitration could have taken a different

form. But this was a dispute between two castes, two communities. The elders' heads began to spin. Before they realised it, not a single person remained in the village who had not taken sides. At last, their eyes fell on an old man. All his life, he had kept to his fields and his family. His connection with the village was limited. If there was a funeral, he went. If there was a wedding feast, he ate. If there was a fire somewhere, he helped. But he had neither the skill for arbitration nor any interest in it. No one ever asked him either."

Laughing, Shila said- "So there really was such a simple, harmless old man?"

At her daughter-in-law's words, a lion-like brightness flashed in Subhadra's eyes. With rising excitement, she said-

"Daughter-in-law, life took so many turns that I can hardly explain. No one went directly to that old man, but all day long they kept coming to me, one after another. They left their own work behind. And whoever came spoke in such a way that I had no choice but to agree. My mind began to feel torn. Finally, I spoke to the old man. The moment I told him, he rose and said- 'I no longer see what is happening where in this village. At meal times, everyone becomes equal, but when it comes to honour and dignity, they turn against one another. It is better to stay away from such a village. For whose sake one steals, that very person cries thief. I do not wish to get entangled in the crooked ways of such a place. It is better to spend one's time arranging one's simple bread and salt, and live in peace.

People began coming one after another, repeating the same pleas. Worn down, we finally persuaded him

with great effort. He agreed. Four o'clock was fixed as the time. The entire village gathered. There was no eyewitness to what the eye could see, yet the conduct of the two made everything clear. By common consent, all agreed that there was a relationship between them. And if there was a relationship, then there had to be a resolution.

A low hum of murmuring began within the gathering. Quietly, the old man watched and listened. The murmurs grew, whispers joined one another, and soon the noise rose. The village split into two sides. One side argued that such relationships existed in every society. Was this the first such incident in their village? What had not happened until today? If someone had once slapped another four times, the fine had been no more than five or ten rupees.

The other side argued that the bonds of caste and community were threads of fragile cotton. If a boy and a girl of similar temperament and age wished to decide their own lives, society should encourage them.

This second view appealed to the old man. He gave his decision accordingly. That settled it. One side was pleased. But from the other side, those who were hot-headed stepped forward and grabbed the old man by the collar, accusing him of becoming a great arbiter indeed. The moment they seized him, a fierce light flared within the old man. He did not pause to explain anything. Crying out, he struck the man four or five slaps across the face. Someone nearby saw one slap, someone else saw two. But the old man and the one who was struck both knew it was five.

The village fell into turmoil. People ran to their

courtyards and returned carrying sticks, forming two opposing lines. Seeing the men rush out with sticks, the women too came running. After all, fear of violence grips everyone.

Once before, in 1942, such an incident had occurred in a neighbouring village. In that case, the boy and the girl had been locked inside a house and burned alive. The outcome had been murder trials, and thirty-one people were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The women of the village were thrown into confusion. Some cried that human life should be lived as human life. Others shouted that the honour of lineage had been cut off. One voice clashed with another. Everyone was frantic with his own arguments. As with the men, so with the women. Yet, all at once, the conflict stopped. The women snatched the sticks from their husbands' hands, grabbed their arms, and dragged them back to their respective courtyards.

The village's playthings were taken over by government players. Colour entered the scene. All the elders who had sat in arbitration already had long experience with courts and police stations. For the new players, a new game and a new field were prepared. Both of the young people were trapped in assault cases, which were resolved only after twenty-five years by the High Court."

Absorbed in herself, Subhadra went on narrating the story of her life to her son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. Just as Devanandan listened with complete attention, so did Shila. Asha's young mind could not hold the thread for long. At times she listened to her grandmother; at other moments, her gaze drifted towards her father's face.

With a playful smile, Shila asked her mother-in-law-

"Mother, did you ever see a prison?"

Subhadra felt no hurt at her daughter-in-law's question. Instead, she sensed that curiosity had fully awakened. Devanandan's eyes too were fixed on his mother, though he remained silent, ears alert, eager to listen.

Subhadra began-

"Daughter-in-law, I fought alongside the old man all the way to the High Court. But I went before the magistrate only twice. Once when the case was filed, to arrange bail, and once on the day they asked whether the mistake had been committed or not."

Shila asked-

"So you never saw what a prison is like?"

Subhadra replied-

"No, daughter. How could I lie? How can I speak of what I have not seen? God has given hair on everyone's body. Why should anyone set it on fire?"

Shila said-

"How many times did the old man go to prison?"

At the mention of her husband, a quiet happiness rose within Subhadra. Smiling, she replied-

"He himself used to say twenty-one times. I saw it too, but I do not remember the exact count."

"Did you go to visit him?"

"Of course I did. They had forbidden taking food inside, but I would slip him betel leaf and lime."

"Did you weep when you saw him?"

"Why would I weep? I knew well enough that he

would be released again in ten or fifteen days. So why cry? People often go and stay with relatives for ten or fifteen days."

"Did you ever quarrel with the old man?"

"Why would there be quarrels? Yes, sometimes there were words over household matters. But he would add things up, explain them calmly, and my mind would settle. Once it happened like that, my son, over arranging your marriage..."

At the mention of "the son's marriage", Asha became alert at once, and Shila too drew herself together, listening closely. Devanandan, however, showed no outward curiosity.

"What happened about the marriage?" Shila asked.

"When my son was still studying," Subhadra said- "I suggested it. In society, children younger than him were already being married. If one lives within society, one must move with society. But the old man believed that Dev should marry only after completing his studies and standing on his own feet. I felt that life has no certainty. If he were to die without marrying, my heart would never find peace. But the old man had to calculate household expenses. There was never even fifty rupees in his hand. In the family, one child or another was always growing up, always needing something."

As he listened to his wife and mother speak, Devanandan drifted into his own world of thought. Silently, he reflected that just as Vibhishan had existed in Lanka, so too such figures exist in every society. There is always one assault after another. In the very society we consider good, why is there theft from grain and water all the way to intellect itself? Why do people lie so easily? Why

do they burn with envy at another's goodness? Why do they violate another man's wife or daughter? Why is abuse and violence so common?

Devanandan felt his mind begin to split under the weight of these questions. He wondered: who in society is untouched by disease of some kind? If everyone is diseased, how can society be healthy? Until the people of society themselves strive to make it good, how will society ever become good? In a village, if one person contracts cholera, the whole village becomes infected. The same is true of other illnesses, and even more so of social illness.

His gaze turned inward. Looking at himself, he saw a doctor. But what kind of doctor? One who treats only bodily ailments. Yet disease does not end there. Alongside diseases of the body, there are diseases of the mind and diseases of tradition, which can also be called diseases of social conduct.

Just as it is difficult–though not impossible–to move against a strong current towards the source, so it is with society. Wherever one looks, there are thickets of wild shrubs, trees bearing bitter fruit, and trees bearing sweet fruit. These are what guide one towards the principled fruits of life.

Seeing both bitter and sweet trees, a seed of contentment sprouted in Devanandan's heart. As that seed took root, the colours of the world seemed to change. His eyes turned towards his father. Beginning at the head and moving slowly towards the feet, his gaze recalled that Ram-katha his father had narrated on the day his name was written in the village school. When Lord Ram departed for the forest, the society of his village insisted on accompanying him. By the time they reached the boundary of the village, evening had fallen. Society

urged him not to go into the forest and to return instead to Ayodhya. But Ram remained firm in his resolve: he would not disobey his father's command.

As evening fell, everyone settled down for the night's rest. When all had fallen asleep, Ram, Lakshman, and Sita departed. Not by the paths of the earth, but leaving the earth behind, they took the path of the sky.

When dawn broke and people awoke, Ram was nowhere to be seen. They moved towards the road, but there were neither hoof-marks of horses nor the tracks of chariot wheels. Disheartened, everyone turned back. In such a society, how had Father managed to live a complete life?

Devanandan's gaze widened. He began to see how many families in society were bound by friendship, and how many by enmity. When he could not ascertain it himself he asked his mother-

"Mother, today we will need society's help. With how many families did Baba have friendships?"

At the mention of friendship, Subhadra grew still. It was as if her mind slipped free of her body and returned to the village. She recalled singing together at kumram, weddings, shama rituals, and songs sung from the household shrine to the Durga shrine.

Seeing her mother-in-law so deeply absorbed, Shila remarked-

"It seems the old lady has fallen asleep!"

At the word "sleep", Subhadra opened her eyes and said-

"No, daughter-in-law, how could I be asleep? I was remembering the children of the mango orchard. God,

too, can be strangely unjust. To some He gives heaps upon heaps, and to others mouths upon mouths to feed. When ripe mangoes are given to children and their hearts are filled with joy, one's own soul finds comfort as well."

Smiling, Shila said-

"The old lady has drifted off again."

Raising her voice, she repeated,

"The son is asking: in the village, with how many people did Baba have friendships?"

"Why do you ask such things, my son?" Subhadra replied. "There was neither friend nor enemy."

Devanandan said-

"When we reach the village, we will have to inform people about Baba's cremation, won't we?"

Hearing her son's words, Subhadra replied-

"Tut, tut. This is Mithila's society. In this society, whether it is to cremate the dead, to extinguish a fire in someone's house, to enquire after someone bitten by a snake, or someone who has fallen from a tree, no one needs to be summoned. These are social duties. All villagers understand them as their own work, and they come prepared on their own."

Hearing his mother's words, Devanandan let out a long breath. As they reached the boundary of the village, everyone fell silent. When they came near their own orchard, Devanandan asked the driver to stop the car. He had seen Raghubir Bhai coming towards them.

Once, the embankments of the Kamla in the west and the Kosi in the east had both broken. The rains were relentless. Water poured down from the hills of Nepal into the plains, gathering force as it came. Why would it not

come? After all, it too carries a longing to merge with the sea. Mithila lies in between; how could it be spared? Floodwater entered the village from the north and spread out, pushing southwards. As long as the water remained confined to the fields and reached only the embankment paths, no one worried. But when it began to surge thickly into courtyards and houses, anxiety took hold.

One hamlet lay in a low-lying area. Water rose from all sides and flooded the courtyards and homes. During the rains, the thatched huts and mud-walled houses had already weakened. When the flood arrived with full force, the mud walls began to collapse, and the thatched roofs swayed like crushed baskets. Seeing their homes fall, the people of the hamlet gathered whatever belongings they could and moved towards the high bank of the village pond.

It was a hamlet of twenty-five families. With bundles and makeshift rafts, around one hundred and thirty people moved together. There were forty to forty-five cows and buffaloes, and twenty-five to thirty goats. The animals trembled with fear at the water and the noise. Some even shed tears. Yet not a single one bolted in panic, nor refused to drink. Everyone untied his animals. As soon as the ropes were loosened, the cattle surged forward and back, lifted by the water's force. But because the water had not risen all at once, there was no loss of life or property.

As soon as the news of the hamlet reached him, Raghunandan called out to Kariya Kaka-

“Come this way, Batu.”

He always addressed Kariya Kaka affectionately as Batu. When he arrived, Raghunandan said- “I hear

floodwater has risen in the eastern hamlet. Shall we go and see?"

Without a word, Kariya Kaka accompanied him. After walking a little way, they saw that everyone, from grown men to children, was carrying something or other on their heads and moving, soaked through, towards higher ground. A thought arose: where they were going, how would they manage to stay? Yet he felt shy even to raise his eyes. People who would not speak directly in ordinary times were now walking openly. Women, with the ends of their saris tied tight, carried grain, bedding, and utensils, and followed their children.

Seeing the state of the people, he said to Kariya Kaka-

"Batu, bring everyone to our place. As far as our strength allows, we will help them across."

They gathered everyone and took them to their own house. The problem was not of the entire country but of a single hamlet, yet it was immense. And society itself is made of many kinds of people. Some feel another's suffering as their own and weep; others laugh. A calamity that has befallen many cannot be resolved by one person alone. And if it cannot be resolved, then in what condition do people die?

A heaviness gathered in the mind. No path seemed clear. The first problem was space to protect people and livestock from the water. How much room was there in their own house? Even that was already full. The courtyard rooms were packed with grain, fuelwood, and farm implements. After all this, only one large space near the doorway remained. It was the family's place of honour, and now it became a shelter for others.

A new hope stirred in Raghunandan's mind: those who have fallen into misfortune also possess the strength to resist it. A smile escaped his lips. From the courtyard to the doorway, places were marked for everyone. The livestock were ordered to be tied immediately along the embankment and the roadside, with stakes driven firmly into the ground. At that moment, food seemed less urgent than securing the animals.

He said to Kariya Kaka-

"Batu, everything is unsettled right now. First arrange food for the people and the animals. We will see to the rest afterwards."

To cook food, fire and hearths were needed. There was not enough flattened rice in the house, and what little there was would not suffice. If rice, lentils, and vegetables were distributed separately, where would there be enough hearths? So first, coconuts were stripped from the trees, pressed for oil, and lamps were lit. All the livestock were fed. Then cooking began. Four people cooked together in one place for everyone. That is what they did. Meals were prepared.

Raghunandan and Kariya Kaka went around the village, embracing everyone, reassuring them. After twenty days, everyone returned to his own homes.

As soon as the news of Raghunandan reached him, Kariya Kaka came running. On arrival, he said to Devanandan-

"Doctor Sahib, first take your brother home. Death did not occur in the house. Let both the family and the people of the village have their final viewing. After that, we will arrange the bier and bring him to the orchard."

Hearing Kariya Kaka's words, reverence for society

arose in everyone’s heart. In Devanandan’s mind, it became clear: the work his father had done for society was the very reason for the respect he now received from it.

Accepting Kariya Kaka’s words, Devanandan stepped down from the car. After him, the three others–Subhadra, Shila, and Asha–also got down. Meanwhile, the news spread through the village. As soon as people heard, they ran from wherever they were to see. Children and elders alike flooded the road until it became impossible to move. There was no space left for the car to go forward. Everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of Raghunandan’s face, but his face was covered. So they saw only a man lying as though asleep beneath a sheet. The crowd pressed in from all sides around the vehicle. There was neither a clear path ahead nor any way for anyone to see Raghunandan.

The four of them stood below, motionless like clay figures, watching face after face. All kinds of faces appeared before them. In some eyes, there were tears and sorrow in the heart; in others, there were neither tears nor grief. Within himself, Kariya Kaka thought for a moment, then said aloud-

“Please clear the way. We are taking him into the courtyard. We will place him there, and everyone may have their final viewing.”

Obeying Kariya Kaka, the crowd made way. The car moved forward, and everyone followed behind, heading towards the house. On reaching home, Raghunandan’s body was brought down and laid out with his head to the north. Subhadra, Shila, and Asha sat beside him. Kariya Kaka said to Devanandan-

“Son, you sit at the doorway. People will come to ask

questions and pay respects. Meanwhile, I will make the arrangements ahead."

All the household hearths were extinguished. Yet there was a quiet composure in everyone's heart. Raghunandan had been the eldest of all. Outwardly, many eyes held tears, but inwardly there was no turmoil.

Clad in fresh garments, Raghunandan lay covered, his face left uncovered. The tulsi plant placed near his head and the fragrance of gugul spread through the courtyard. Men and women filled the space. The men paid their respects and then moved to the doorway, while the women remained seated in the courtyard, speaking quietly among themselves. The younger children began to play on the veranda.

Radhia Dadi, one hundred and eleven years old, arrived leaning on a bamboo walking stick. She was extremely old. Not a single tooth remained in her mouth, nor a strand of dark hair on her head. Her face was broad. On her right cheek was a large mole from which two long white hairs grew, each nearly an inch in length. The skin of her entire body had loosened and sagged. Three deep lines ran across her forehead like grooves, and above her cheeks there were similar lines, while the skin of her lower face hung loose like the neck of a cow.

As she stepped into the courtyard, young and old alike made way for her and cleared a place beside Subhadra for her to sit. There was pain in her eyes, though the tears had until then remained pooled in her pupils. Just then, a five-year-old boy named Luchba grabbed hold of her walking stick. Three small bells had been fixed to the stick like the strings of a musical instrument, and he began to shake it so that it rang. All

the children nearby gathered around. Seeing them, Subhadra scolded gently-

"I told you all to play on the veranda. Why have you come here?"

Subhadra's rebuke did not sit well with the old woman. She said gently but firmly-

"Daughter, why do you scold the children? You are capable, so you do not understand why all this happens. Just as after winter come the summer months, and after summer the rains, and as the cycle that begins with summer finds its resting place again in winter, so too is this body. I am the winter of Kartik–Agahan; these children are the winter of Phagun–Chaitra. Yet the sun remains the same. At times it burns fiercely; at others, it softens and cools."

As the old woman was still speaking, Shila rose and gently took her by the right arm, leading her forward. When they reached Raghunandan, tears streamed from the old woman's eyes like sudden golden rain. But they did not flow for long, only for as long as her mind lingered on her own age. As her gaze travelled from the front to the back of Raghunandan's life, a laugh rose to her lips. Seeing her laugh, Asha said-

"Grandmother has not a single tooth. Will she grow any now?"

At Asha's words, the old woman laughed loudly. Her wide, toothless mouth seemed as large as three mouths together. After one burst of laughter, she said to Subhadra-

"Daughter-in-law, you are still young, so some sorrow is bound to touch you. But my husband left me when I was younger than you are now. Compared to that,

your hardship is small. God has given you everything. In a full and flourishing household, you have a son like Shravan Kumar, a daughter-in-law like Lakshmi, and such a beautiful grandchild, like a toy come alive. Then why grieve? Now we ourselves have become like seeds of creation that no longer carry the power to sprout. Just as grains or fruit seeds grow old over the years and lose their strength to germinate, so have we become. But does that mean human strength fades in the same way as seeds of grain or fruit? Is everyone's strength ever the same?"

Just then Asha skipped forward and asked-

"Grandmother, how many days have passed for you?"

The old woman laughed and replied-

"Oh, you little chatterbox, you ask me about days? It has been twenty-two and a half gahi years."

No one understood the old woman's reckoning of years. Everyone looked bewildered, glancing from one face to another. Even the old woman sensed their confusion. Smiling, she said to Shila-

"Not mother-in-law, she is my maai. She is my younger sister-in-law. When I came here at the age of five, that was when Raghu was born. Let me tell it once, just as it was. At that time, my uncle was still strong, though older than me. In the month of Magh, the Makar fair would begin. Most people from our village used to go to Hardi. Raghu and I went to Hardi together. Hardi lies a little beyond Bidesar. But at Bidesar the fair had begun to turn unruly. From Nirmali to Darbhanga, all along the railway line, pickpockets would arrive early in the morning trains and start their mischief. Because of this, people

from respectable households stopped going to Bidesar. Even so, Baba of Bidesar was greatly revered, so despite all the trouble, the fair continued to grow.

"People from our village stopped going, but the region is wide, and people from nearby places still came. As a result, the trouble gradually died down there. Along with Hardi, two other obstacles arose. At Parsadham, the idol of Surya Bhagwan was uprooted, and a new site was established. The idol itself is divine. One image is of Surya Bhagwan, the other is a very precious stone. The temple is fine too. But in recent times, the communal influence that grew around Madaneshwar dealt a heavy blow to both Parsadham and Hardi. Hardi also has Mahadev seated in a deep hollow, where water remains filled throughout the year."

In between, Subhadra looked towards the old woman and asked-

"Sister, how long did you nurse the child?"

The old woman began-

"In strength I was very robust. It was my first child. My milk came easily. Kaki fell ill. Her milk dried up. Raghu survived by drinking my milk. When he turned one, began to eat solid food, toddled about, and his speech began to form, Kaki taught him to call me milk-mother. I liked that. He never called me son, but he did call me child. After a year and a half, my milk too began to dry up. There was no neglect in food or care, but some other reason took over-

"I used to go to the Makar fair. Kaki asked me to take the child along. Every year we would bring back taripat from there, which we used as spice throughout the year. In those days, Hardi fair was famous for its harish, clay

vessels, and tada-tadi. I was seven or eight years old then. Many women and children from the village would go. I myself took my own son and the child with me. I prepared flatbreads from arwa rice and cooked seem-bhanta curry. We ate there itself.”

In between, Asha interrupted eagerly-

“After eating, did you go to see Mahadev?”

At Asha’s words, the old woman burst into laughter and said:

“The Hardi fair is a fair for women. You’ll find more women and children there than men. By ten in the morning, everyone finishes eating, and then they wander about until late afternoon. Most of our kinship ties lie in that very stretch–daughters and daughters-in-law come from one side, mothers and sisters from another–so meetings happen naturally at the fair.

As the saying goes, ‘A cat has no leash; it does as it pleases.’ So it is with womenfolk and with old women too. Whatever the heart desires is what one does.”

She paused, then continued-

“Yes, so I was saying, I had taken the child with me. We sat on the embankment of the Berhati pond and began to eat. I gave the child a piece of flatbread and some curry. I turned southwards, towards the pond, and began eating myself. My head was bent, and the end of my sari hung loose.

Just then, a jingle-seller came by. Children followed behind him. He had dyed palm leaves pink and made rattles from them. He shook one rattle in his hand while balancing the rest on a tray on his head.

While I was still eating, the child ran after him. I

didn't notice a thing. Children are always quick like that.

The jingle-seller moved on. When I lifted my bowl to drink water and looked up, the child was gone. Oh Lord! In that crowd, where could I even look? A terrible panic seized me. Crying out, I gathered the taripat and the palm fruit and began searching.

If there had been only one jingle-seller, perhaps I would have found him quickly. But wherever I turned, there were jingle-sellers everywhere. My heart began to give up. I kept thinking, what will I tell Kaki? And she was ill at the time.

In my heart I cried out to Chandeshwar Baba. In all the shrines, no one ever goes missing, but at yours this has happened?

In those days, children weren't stolen at holy places as they are now. Still, my mind wouldn't settle. One hears such things, that someone's son or daughter disappeared at this place or that. The fear wouldn't leave me. What will Kaki say? What will the village say?

Then another thought came: What if he's found his way back to the embankment on his own?

So I set out again, taripat in one hand, palm fruit in the other. On both sides of the road, shopkeepers had laid out their stalls, and people flowed between them like a tide.

Suddenly, in front of the temple gate, a large crowd surged forward. There was a crush on the road. Just then, the end of my sari slipped from my head. What to do now? Both hands were full. How could I pull it back up? And if I didn't, what would people say?

Just then, the palm fruit fell from my right hand and burst into pieces. But first, I pulled the sari back over my

head.

A shard pierced someone's foot. He cursed angrily and said- 'If you're so clumsy, why come to fairs at all?'

But I was already broken inside. I said nothing.

Quietly, I slipped out of the crowd. Once outside, I raised my eyes and saw a jingle-seller coming from the north, heading south. I stood by the roadside and stared.

And there–behind him–was the child following him like before.

My body felt suddenly light. Only one hand was free, but I ran, grabbed the child by the arm, and pulled him aside.

When I returned to the pond embankment, there was no one left. Everyone had gone. Travellers from other villages were already on the road home.

I joined that stream and walked back."

Smiling, Shila asked-

"Did you scold him after all that trouble?"

From the old woman's mouth came words filled with affection-

"Ram, Ram. Why would one scold an innocent child? An innocent child is to be guided with understanding, not beaten. If you beat a child, the child becomes timid, does he not?

Yes, so I was saying, when we returned to the village I told Kaki that such restless little souls should not be taken to fairs and gatherings. Kaki was startled and asked what had happened, so I told her the whole story. Despite the difference in our ages, we shared a bond. During Joor Sheetal we blessed one another with achhijnajal (sacred water) and during Phagua we played with colours

together.”

Turning again towards Subhadra, the old woman said-

“Sister, my husband left me when I was younger than you are now. It must be more than sixty years ago. You have reached an age now. Has God left anything lacking, from family to society, that you should grieve and suffer? The world is a garden. One comes, one goes. Just as throughout the year one thing is born, another enjoys its youth, and another ripens and dries, so it is with human beings too. In God’s garden there is a strange yet orderly movement. In that garden there is a season of the year, a season of the month, a season of the day, where at every moment one arrives and another departs.

We are human beings. Even though we are social beings, we are human first, and only then everything else. To attain humanity is the foremost task of a human being. When a person attains humanity, only then does he begin to recognise and understand the world, to establish relationships from family to society, and to fulfil the duties that arise from those relationships. Even so, the child before me is still a child. Though within social relations he may be a brother-in-law or sister-in-law, God has done no injustice. It would have been fitting if He had taken me first.”

As this thought rose in her mind, tears welled up in both of Radhia Dadi’s eyes.

Just then, Bachnu, Chanchal, Jholi, Bouku, and Batthu arrived, having removed their upper garments, wearing only waistcloths and dhotis tied at their hips, carrying spades on their shoulders. From the courtyard to the doorway, women, men, and children filled every

space.

Seeing the crowd, Devanandan's mind seemed to lift and drift. From the courtyard to the doorway, he felt he could see his father's smiling spirit moving among them. He forgot his own life for a moment. A thought arose within him: how effortlessly society understands its role without being told. Such collective action does not appear only at the time of death; it emerges at weddings, at many moments in life. To laugh together, to weep together, to sing together, to dance together: what could be more beautiful than this?

What is happiness for which people stoop to the lowest acts, yet still fail to obtain it?

Wearing a single piece of white cloth around his waist, Shrikant arrived. He had retired from the post of Barababu at the Madhubani court. With his head bowed, he went straight into the courtyard, touched the feet in reverence, then stood on one leg, smacking his lips softly, murmuring in a low voice-

"Kaka, by God's grace I retired after a lifetime of service on the chair. Just as my life passed in ease, so may the remaining days also pass in peace."

Turning towards Subhadra, Shrikant added-

"Kaki, I too am a son of this very society. Just as you consider Dev to be your son, consider me the same."

Hearing Shrikant's words, memories stirred within Subhadra. A thought rose in her mind: look how yesterday's boy has grown old. The old man himself had been frail with age. In wind and storm, he would have broken and fallen sooner or later. May God grant such a death to all. Such deaths do not come to everyone. It is not that only my bangles have broken, only my vermilion

has been washed away; such things happen to many in this world.

With his head lowered, Shrikant stepped out from the courtyard to the doorway and sat quietly beside Devanandan. He did not yet have the courage to speak. It was as though his tongue trembled in his mouth. Gathering resolve, he raised his eyes and said to Devanandan-

“Babu Dev, though you are younger in years, in every way you stand above me. Let me speak my mind. In earlier times, homes were not as they are now. Baba was extremely hardworking. Alongside human conduct, divine calamities too were a constant presence. On one side there was deceit and wrongdoing; on the other, there were floods and storms, earthquakes and droughts, cold waves again and again. Added to that were illnesses and epidemics that never ceased.

When I passed my examinations and the time came to fill out forms, Baba was already weak. He had fallen ill with kala-azar…”

Shrikant’s eyes welled up. He began wiping them with both hands. At the mention of kala-azar, Dr. Devanandan thought to himself that in their region kala-azar had once been no less terrifying than cancer is today. Wiping his eyes, Shrikant went on-

“Day by day Baba’s body kept wasting away. Medicine was brought again and again from Gunakarpur; even elephant dung was tried. I was a child then; my understanding was limited. Whatever Mother told me, I did. I did not even have the courage to ask her for money to fill the examination form. All day I watched her anxiety and strain. One by one, the other students submitted

their forms. Inside me there was a strange turmoil. As the final date approached, hope began to slip away. It felt as though calamity had come and stood over me. The colours of the world began to look distorted and unfamiliar.

"On the last day, at four in the afternoon, the headmaster sent word through a student, saying, 'If you come to me tomorrow, I will still have your form. After that it will be difficult to fill it.' Nothing felt right. I had no desire to eat or drink. Then a thought came to my mind that I should speak to Raghunandan Kaka once. That is what I did. I went to him and told him everything. He asked me, 'How much time is left?' I told him that today was the last date, but that the headmaster had shown kindness and given time until tomorrow. From the doorway, Kaka asked Kaki to bring money from the box. She brought it out and placed it before him, the way a child might lay out a bundle. Then Kaki said- 'There is not a single grain of rice left in the house.' Just as Kaki spoke, Kaka replied- 'We can remain hungry for one or two evenings. But this is a question of a life. That is why people call such acts dharma.' Those were drought-stricken days. In the village, some people were eating coarse maize bread, some bread made of inferior millet, some boiled wild tubers, some lentils of khesari, and even then, no one ate to their fill. For many households, the evening hearth did not light at all."

As he spoke, tears began to spill from Shrikant's eyes. With each drop of sorrow that fell from his gaze, Devanandan felt a coolness rise within his heart, as though a soothing breeze were lifting from the earth. He asked gently- "And how is your family now?"

Shrikant wiped his eyes with the loose end of his

dhoti and said- “Child, we are living in great comfort. Both my sons have passed their B.A. and are in service. The elder one teaches in a high school, the younger works at the block office. Every Saturday evening they come home, and on Monday morning, after eating and drinking, they leave again. The house is full with both daughters-in-law and all five grandchildren. I receive my pension as well. God did not give us a daughter, but still we educated both sons, built a six-room house to live in, and bought three bighas of land. During the rainy season we had a handpump installed, so we do not have to buy vegetables. The remaining land has been given out on sharecropping. The whole day passes in one activity or another. I never feel how time slips away. All these years I opened office files; now I spend two or three hours a day reading the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Along with that, I teach the children and tell them stories, drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well. Once a year, counting month by month, we go on a journey across the country. That way, pilgrimage is also done. We ourselves do not have much, but I still keep Uncle’s words in my ears even today: if someone poorer than oneself comes asking for something, then even if one cannot give betel leaf, one should at its stem. My mind is never troubled by worry.”

Just then kisun lal sat down in front of the verandah to twist soaked hemp into cord. Sodhan also came in, carrying an axe over his shoulder. After arriving, he asked Kariya Kaka- “Brother, shall we cut bamboo?”

“How many of you are going?”

“How many should we cut?”

“Hey, you foolish fellow, is that even something to ask? A broad and sturdy bamboo platform has to be

made. What is there that your brother lacks that he would be squeezed and pressed on a small bamboo platform? Bring at least four bamboos- two thick ones and two slender ones.”

“Which grove should we cut from?”

“Why do you ask like a complete novice? Haven’t you seen it?”

“I have seen everything. We used to cut and take them year after year, yet I might still not have noticed. Or perhaps I have forgotten now. When elder brother was alive, things went the same way, and they will go on the same way. Five bamboos were cut each year, straight or slanting, from the same place. But I did not say that. I only asked whether we should cut from the Haroth grove or from the Chabh.”

Hearing Sodhan’s words, Kariya Kaka fell silent and began to think. But it was familiar ground- work he understood well, so his reflection did not last long. Smiling slightly, he said-

“Haroth has tough, masculine bamboo thick up to chest with twigs like moustache and beard. It will take time to smooth it properly, and with that, one extra tool will be worn out. In a working household, every small thing is frequently needed.”

Listening to Kariya Kaka, Sodhan laughed and moved towards the cowshed. Just then, both Lelaha and his wife came hurrying in. Feeling guilty, Lelaha stood before Kariya Kaka. Kariya Kaka understood at once that he had been off somewhere earlier and had therefore come late. When someone who should be going ahead ends up behind, there is always some earlier task behind it. Smiling, he said- “Son, were you sleeping until now?”

With his lips tightening, Lelaha replied-

"Kaka, after so many days, work finally came today. That's what I had gone out to do."

"What work did you go for?"

"I went to trim Ghurna Bhaiya's sheesham branches. He has eight medium-sized trees there. I have never seen trees like those. All year long there is only quarrelling and fighting of hornets and red ants there. But today what I saw was strange. On four of the trees there were neither red ants nor hornets. On two trees there were wood-boring insects, and on two there were hornets. I had finished trimming of three trees when Sonma Mai came running and said Raghu Dada had passed away. I had taken a few branches from the edge. I thought that while coming down, hornets would surely sting there; otherwise there were still so many branches left that I could take them anyway."

"Oh Kaka, what should I say. There were huge hornet nests, full of birds, all around. That is why I got delayed a little on the eastern side."

"It will be all right. For now, much work has been delayed. At least you have brought the hoe. Go with Sodhan and cut bamboo."

"Kaka, I will also get the branched for making enclosures. Until then, I'll tie the bundle there and leave it."

"Very good."

"Kaka, the rope hay also will be required, won't it?"

"You reminded me, I had forgotten."

Lelaha said to his wife-

"First, let's go and bow before kaka. Then I will go to

cut bamboo, and you bring the rope hay. I have kept it hung from the bamboo pieces of the cottage. Leave half of it there and bring the other half."

Saying this, Lelaha leaned close to Kariya Kaka's ear and whispered-

"Kaka, I am exhausted. I'm thirsty too. I'll drink water, but how will I eat now? Just once, prepare a chillum for me."

Kariya Kaka did not scold Lelaha. With a gesture of his eyes he said to Sodhan-

"Take the sickle and the hoe. Give him the bag as well, and in my name buy five rupees' worth of ganja. Smoke it there itself, in the bamboo grove."

Having set each task in its proper order, Kariya Kaka went on ahead towards the bamboo thicket. The three of them began preparing to smoke, and the two of them started weighing one against the other, Raghunandan and Devnandan.

"However big a doctor Devnandan may become, what difference will that make? Will he ever match Raghunandan Kaka?"

Hearing Sodhan's words, Kariya Kaka asked with curiosity,

"What do you mean by that?"

"All day long, Kaka Raghunandan handled giving and taking like Mahadev himself. Could a doctor ever do that?"

Drawing deeply on the chillum and blowing the smoke upward, Kariya Kaka said-

"You yourself are saying it, Sodhan. People even blame my own mother and father, saying that if the parents who gave birth to me, if God himself, saw no

virtue in me, why would they give me the name ‘Kariya’? Is it because my skin is dark? So I was born as a stain upon society. However much one tries to make people understand, my words still fall short. Those who do understand will understand and close their mouths. But how will those who keep generating new generations, layer upon layer, ever understand? Still, where is the sorrow in that? I am not of the kind of society that believes life is contained within the boundaries of wealth and village limits. I belong to that society in which the cart keeps rolling from birth to death, from the threshold of the house all the way to the cremation ground.”

While Kariya Kaka was still speaking, Lelaha had taken two quick drags. The intoxication rose in him like the venom of a coiled snake. Handing the chillum to Sodhan, he said-

“Kaka, once I went all the way to Assam to cut jute. People from our area go every year to cut jute and harvest paddy in Morang, Assam, even Dhaka. But that time it was my first journey. From Kakarbhitta we caught a bus, went through Siliguri, and reached Assam. I saw a huge river there. The bus conductor pointed with his finger to a hill and said- ‘The Kamakhya temple of Kamrup is on that hill.’”

Passing the chillum back, Sodhan asked-

“Which Kamakhya?”

Hearing this, Lelaha burst out laughing and said-

“Brother, you too speak like a simpleton. It is that Kamakhya, the place where people learn spells and sorcery, then come back to our region and deceive women. They will tell you that the most powerful mantra comes from invoking the womb itself. On a Friday night,

at ten o'clock, they go and perform the invocation."

Sodhan cut in midway- "Did you not go there and see it?"

Lelaha replied- "Oh brother, you go too far. Once we had reached Gauhati, how could we not go? We went and saw it. From birds to human beings, sacrifices take place there. Yes, but I was saying this: when we got down from the bus, it was raining. We were delayed there for a while. When the rain stopped, it was already quite late. My heart was craving tea. Nothing felt right. All four of us went into a tea shop, and seeing the decoration there, we were left speechless. Where do we see such decoration in our region?"

"What kind of decoration was it?" Sodhan asked.

Lelaha said-

"When we asked the shopkeeper, he said it was made from bamboo strips. Seeing the workmanship, I was astonished. What skilled people there are. Bamboo chairs, tables, even flower vases were made of it. We stood staring at the decorative arch at the entrance for half an hour. People make baskets and winnowing trays in our area too, but nothing like that. Neither such grandeur, nor such temple-like houses.

The bamboo there is strange too. In our region there are twenty or twenty-five varieties of bamboo, but there they have perhaps hundreds. From bamboo as fine as what you make toothpicks from, to thick, heavy culms that take both arms to hold. The kind of bamboo you see used for palanquins grows in entire groves there. There is bamboo for making umbrella handles as well. Old bamboo groves there have swollen, bursting joints."

The chillum had burnt down. Getting up, Kariya Kaka

said- “Do not take too long. I am moving ahead.”

Hearing this, Lelaha said-

“Kaka, just as work becomes easier and crowds increase when the water recedes and tools like the spade, hoe, and sickle can be used, in the same way there are tasks for those who live with low water and tasks for those who live with rising water. For a long time we were in the low-water phase; now the water has risen. Before you even reach there, we will arrive. But let me say one thing clearly. Raghunandan Kaka was the honour of the village. This final task rests on the shoulders of society, so it must be done properly.”

They cut four bamboos and all three of them returned. From the two thick ones, they made two stout poles. From the remaining two slender ones, they began to split planks. Two worked at splitting, while the other two cut each piece in half and shaped the planks.

When the news of Raghunandan’s death spread, hearths across the extended kin group fell silent. Yet there was no uniformity within that circle. In some households the hearths were extinguished, while in others they continued to burn.

Raghunandan’s kin group was the largest in the village. This had not come about overnight; it had grown steadily over time. Its earlier authority was no longer what it once had, yet the villagers still acknowledged it inwardly. There were reasons for the decline of that earlier standing. The influx of daughters led some families to fragment, and from the time Satna and Ramchandra came into being, the kin group’s cohesion weakened further. Both behaved in ways that, within the village, came to be spoken of with disapproval. They did not even

recognise the women of their own lineage as sisters. As a result, elders both within and outside the family began referring to the clan as “the split lineage.” For these reasons, Raghunandan himself never felt as close to kinship politics as others might have wished. Even so, one thing still held true: whenever disputes arose with outsiders or people of other castes, the entire kin group stood together. To this day, they had at least upheld one custom: the bier was carried by members of the kin group themselves, lifted from the courtyard and taken to the grove.

Even now, the most educated kin family in the village belonged to Devnandan. But Guru Kaka and Padhua Bhai had taken to their beds. From the day Dayakant completed his medical studies and began work, he had left the village with his wife and children. Umakant did the same after finishing engineering. Such departures had now become routine, almost a fashion. Even those with ordinary jobs left the village behind. Guru Kaka and Padhua Bhai were not particularly old in years, yet grief had driven both of them to their beds. Their minds were unsettled, and though they remained at home, they went nowhere.

The careless ways of people today, men and women alike, left the heart continually weighed down. The younger generation had become such that they understood good thought and good action only as words, not as lived qualities. How could they understand otherwise? The fruit of action comes only after the action is done; how could it be obtained without doing the work?

To uphold kinship custom, Sukhdev came to Devnandan and said- “Son Dev, you are young, that is why

you do not understand the traditions of the kin group. Until now, the custom in our lineage has been that the bier is carried from the courtyard to the grove by men of our own kin."

Hearing this, Devnandan said nothing. But standing to one side, Kariya Kaka began to smile. In his heart, a quiet amusement stirred. Being present in the village, he felt little need to speak. His body itself bore witness to his state: he could barely steady his waist, the dhoti kept slipping from his hips, and his hair had turned coarse and unruly.

Looking towards Devnandan, Kariya Kaka said to Sukhdev- "O Sukhdev, brother Sahib has gone beyond caste and kinship and now stands within society. Let whoever wishes do as they see fit. If they themselves carry the bier to the grove, what harm is there in that? That too is a form of work. But words alone will not suffice. One has to step in and do it together, does one not?"

Saying this, Kariya Kaka fell silent. Yet within him the thought kept rising: life was spent watching cinema with one's wife, and now comes the lesson on belonging. Is there not even a trace of shame in one's blood?

He kept the thought to himself and, changing the subject, spoke again-

"While we are arranging things on this side, you should go and gather people as well."

Meanwhile, Sundar Kaka came rushing in. Both maternal cousins, Parsu and Kapar, had gone to break their heads over the matter, and he had followed them out of concern.

Between the two maternal cousins there was one

and a half kathas of homestead land. There were no houses in the centre of the village. The village itself was congested, so buying even a scrap of homestead land was nearly impossible. Who would demolish their own house? True, there were five bighas of fields beyond the embankment, but no one settles in the fields alone for the sake of land. In earlier times, the maternal grandfather's family lived together, spread out but united. They built platforms of earth and rows of coconut palms. The well stood in one corner of the courtyard. But once personal differences arose, people began to crowd into the homestead. The two brothers separated. It seemed reasonable at the time.

Like a climber plant, the elder brother's family kept expanding. God favoured him with seven sons and six daughters. There was no problem with schooling, but marriages kept getting delayed. Even so, the shortage of space in the house began to be felt. He himself suffered from tuberculosis. His wife, worn down by repeated childbirths, was no better. Yet, just as anger persisted, so too did the pride of being the elder brother remain alive in both of them.

The younger brother had only two sons, so he felt no such pressure. In a clash involving five brothers wielding sticks, it was the younger brother, thin and slight among the kin, who ended up with a split forehead. But his wife took revenge. First, she smashed a tile on her brother-in-law's head and, hurling abuse at the sister-in-law, shouted- "You waste the whole day in idle gossip, and by night you turn so virtuous and upright!"

On hearing the abuse from the younger sister-in-law, she was about to retaliate, but before matters could

worsen, people from the neighbourhood arrived and broke up the quarrel. Sundar Kaka had gone to settle that very dispute. Only then did he learn that Raghunandan Bhai had passed away. As soon as he heard, he gave his maternal uncle fifteen days' time and returned at once. The moment he entered the village, he removed his shoes, wrapped the end of his dhoti around his body, and came straight on. As he stepped into the courtyard, he learnt that the body was lying there. Leaving aside the path towards the grove, he turned towards the house instead. When he reached the threshold, Kariya Kaka came face to face with him. Seeing him, he asked-

"Is the work moving ahead, or has it fallen behind?"

Turning his gaze aside, Kariya Kaka replied-

"The work on this side is more or less in order, ...but?"

"All right, then."

Saying this, Sundar Kaka moved ahead and reached Raghunandan. Falling at his feet, his lips trembling, he whispered softly-

"We lived together all our lives. If there was ever any bitterness between us, let it be forgotten."

Then, turning towards Subhadra with a faint smile, he addressed her-

"Bhabhi."

Hearing Sundar Kaka's voice, Subhadra met his eyes and said-

"Child."

At the sound of "child" from Subhadra's lips, Sundar Kaka immediately stepped out of the courtyard and went to Devnandan, saying- "Child Dev, there is only a

difference of three months in age between the two brothers. We grew up together from childhood. I see all the arrangements being made, but where are the bhajan singers? In death there is sorrow, but there is also a form of joy. Joy comes when the acts of joy are performed. Brother Sahib himself used to sing the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He also listened to bhajans and kirtans. Today, when he is leaving this world, why should we not offer at least five bhajans along with him?"

Hearing Sundar Kaka's words, Devnandan was left speechless. Inwardly he reflected and said- "Kaka, I do not understand all the ways of society. For now, I will watch how Kariya Kaka handles things."

Listening to Devnandan, a thought arose in Sundar Kaka's mind that Kisun Lal had not yet come into view. His heart began to stir. Not loudly, but quietly, he said-

"A sleeping man is called deaf. Wherever he looks, that is where the rain falls."

From behind the screen of mats, Kisun Lal too heard Sundar Kaka's words, but he said nothing.

As he left to call the bhajan singers, Sundar Kaka called out loudly- "Kisun, I am going to fetch the bhajan singers. You take care of the arrangements here."

After walking a little distance ahead, something struck him. He turned back.

Seeing Sundar Bhai turn around, Kisun Lal felt that perhaps some unfinished reproach still remained, and that was why he had returned. Kisun Lal steadied his heaving chest, but the feeling reversed itself. Just as Kisun Lal's mind was restless with the expectation of hearing reproach, Sundar Bhai's mind was restless with the urge to ask Kisun Lal something.

Coming close, he asked- "Kisun, in times of strength we used to listen to bhajans and kirtans with full instruments. Now we sing only within ourselves. Who are the singers left today?"

Hearing the question, Kisun Lal replied with agitation-

"What is lacking now? All these years, Jibach Bhai used to sing to the dhol and peepahi. Chhitan and Ranglal played the horn to accompany the guna. All three were close to Bhai Sahib. All three are still alive, so it is necessary to call all of them."

The two of them were still talking when Lelaha arrived, placing the bamboo and tools aside, and said-

"Kaka, let me tell you a story. It was during my brother's wedding. Father told us to go with the wedding party. My heart did not want to go as a guest. Why? Because Rajkumar's wedding was also taking place then. I was still a child. Without telling anyone, I slipped in at the back of the wedding procession. In those days, there were no vehicles like today to drop people off. When we reached the bride's house, I too was counted among the guests. They fed us soaked peanuts and flattened rice. The chillies mixed into the curry were so bitter that we played about wildly on that very stretch. We played all night as well. It became utter chaos. We grew exhausted. I wished there were fine mats laid out so that we could sleep comfortably, wrapped up tight. But the verandah was small.

The elders somehow managed to crowd themselves onto the verandah, but there was no space left for the children. Then the mistress of the house brought out grain from the store, tied it up outside, spread straw over

it, and made a bedding there. Seeing the bedding made my heart was glad. I went at once and claimed a corner.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the women of the house came and rubbed itchy leaves onto our foreheads and bodies. At the time, I did not realise it. But when the itching began and my sleep broke, my stomach felt tight like rice packed into a sack. Only two hands to scratch with, but the itching covered the whole body. I got up and began scratching from below upwards, when my hands touched my head. I used both hands and felt that my entire scalp was like a heap of betel nuts. Feeling around, my fingers reached the forehead and it felt like a woman's hair bun. On one side, the itchy leaves were being released from the forehead, while on the other side they were clinging fast. And my whole body kept itching too. On top of that, it felt as if my stomach would burst. I was in terrible trouble. Anger rose up. Holding both ears, I swore that from that day on I would never go with a wedding party again.

But then another thought came to my mind. If I never go as a guest to anyone's wedding, who will come to mine? If no one goes as a wedding guest, how will a marriage take place? Will someone trick a woman into a temple marriage and then later get beaten with sticks in the village council? What kind of wedding would that be without a wedding party? Who would be the witnesses? And if ever there were a dispute later, who would sit in judgement at the council?

On one side my whole body was itching, and on the other the thought of marriage struck me. As soon as marriage came to mind, another thought rose within me: unless one endures pain, how can one ever understand

the happiness of living with a wife?”

Smiling, Kariya Kaka interrupted him midway- “So you stayed caught up in daily mischief and chatter. Will you not say what you mean to say about your brother?”

Hearing Kariya Kaka, Lelaha’s mind moved away from itching memories and settled on his brother’s wedding. He said-

“The moment Father said we would go with the wedding party, I felt the urge to clean my vest and trousers. In the village we wear torn, old, dirty clothes. But at a wedding, the girls will tease you the moment they see you. I brought fuller’s earth from the fallow patch and told Mother to wash them thoroughly. When she had washed them and they had dried, I went to the pond steps and scrubbed them until they shone. There were two tears in the shirt. I asked Mother to stitch them. She brought a needle from Aunt, pulled thread from the border of an old sari, and sewed it up.”

Seeing the rush of work, Kariya Kaka cut in again- “You know how much work is still pending. Say what you have to say, and say it quickly.”

Lelaha continued-

“Yes, Kaka. Two days before the wedding, Raghuni Kaka came and told Father that sons and daughters belong equally to the rich and the poor. Parents are parents everywhere. God has made everyone’s heart the same colour. In a son’s or daughter’s wedding, everyone carries the same wish. There is a singariya band in the village. One good performance will happen, and that poor fellow will eat with the community and pass the time laughing and talking with them.

Hearing this, Father said- ‘The horn player will ask

for money. Where will we give it from?'

Then Raghunandan Kaka said- 'Come with me. We will tell him it is work for the community, and even if he cannot pay full wages, he should give only nominal remuneration and take charge of the work. There may be no money, but he will be fed.'

That is what happened. Even before reaching the groom's door, on the way he told me, 'Son, you must dance for them. Stay close to me.'

When the groom reached the door, all the old women of the village came singing, carrying offerings in baskets, and tied the ceremonial knots. The big men and the well-off stood at the back, chuckling and whispering. Quietly, Ranglal Kaka slipped into the middle. I followed behind him. It was dark. All at once, he blew the horn with full force. The sound was so loud that everyone was startled. As soon as they were startled, there was pushing and running. One fell, and others began falling on him like sheep. Just as, when piling grain, baskets are emptied one over another, that is how it turned out. I too was caught in the middle.

Kaka, what can I say? More than ten people, from stout men to half-grown boys, were beneath me and above me. It was so heavy that I began to cry."

Smiling, Kariya Kaka said-

"Enough, you foolish fellow, that is how men are."

"That was when I was still a child, wasn't it...?"

Still smiling, he replied-

"Was it only me who cried, or were all those trapped underneath crying as well?"

"And the ones on top?"

"They were laughing like jackals. That is why, Kaka, that poor fellow is now in his old age. These days there are all sorts of new Bombay-style bands. We should tell him too."

Nodding his head, Sundar Kaka said-

"Very well. You all manage things here. I will go over there."

As Sundar Kaka was leaving, something came back to Kariya Kaka's mind. He called out-

"Brother, listen for a moment. One person will be left out."

"Who?"

"Chhitan Bhai. I just remembered something of a bygone day. It was the month of Aghan. The late-harvest paddy was being cut. On that day it was just Bhai Sahib and me there. He had his labourers; I was cutting on my own. It was around noon. Leaving his pigs in the low-lying field to graze, Chhitan with his wife reached Bhai Sahib carrying his guna (a musical instrument). The cut paddy was spread out, and both of them sat down on it and began tuning the guna. Bhai Sahib said- 'Batua, have some tobacco.' I went and rubbed tobacco well. Both of us took it and gave some to Chhitan as well. Chhitan pointed towards Raghunandan Bhai and said to his wife that even their family had a share in Bhai Sahib's paddy, didn't they. He offered to sing five songs.

...Both of them began singing to the guna. What can I say, brother? It felt as if I could lift them both up in my hands and place them on my head. I had never heard such affection before, as I heard then. They were singing songs of King Bhartrihari and Pingala. That poor fellow is still alive. We should tell him too."

"Very good," said Sundar Kaka, and moved ahead. Jibach's house came first on the way. Reaching there, he said to Jibach,

"Brother, Raghunandan Bhai has left this world. Come with your instrument."

Hearing this, Jibach called out to his wife- "Our master has passed away. Call the boys. All of us will go together."

Muniya went off to call the sons and nephews. Jibach then began speaking to Sundar Kaka-

"Brother, let me tell you an event of one day. It was the month of Magh. A cold wave was blowing. Night was as harsh as day. We had not eaten during the day. The cold felt deadly. The hearth fire had almost gone out. There was nothing left to feed it. Straw had been spread as bedding, that was all. I felt like burning it, then thought, if the fire dies, where will we sleep? Hunger made the mind restless as well. Both of us went to Girhat Babu's place. Raghunandan Babu had set up a big hearth in the landlord's house. He himself was sitting there. We could not gather the courage to approach him directly. We called out from the threshing floor with all the strength we had. He called back from beside the fire, telling us to come there.

...We went. We ate, and we slept right there by the hearth in the landlord's house. If we had even faintly heard the news in our ears, we would have come ourselves. Until now, we had heard nothing. Come, let us go back quickly."

With the dhol (drum) and peepahi (Flute) Jibach arrived; with the guna Chhitan came; with the horn Ranglal appeared. Each began to play his instrument. As

auspicious songs are sung at a daughter's wedding, so now melodies flowed from the mouths of the instruments. Not just the house and courtyard, the whole village air began to throb with sound. To the rhythm of the music, some hummed softly, some danced, children jumped and ran about, and the old men and women remembered Raghunandan in silence, overwhelmed by broken ties and old bonds.

Breathless, Phonch Bhai arrived and said to Devnandan- "Doctor Sahib, everything seems arranged, but where are the ghee and the incense?"

Hearing this, Devnandan replied-

"Kariya Kaka and Sundar Kaka are managing all arrangements. The entire responsibility rests with them. Ask them."

All at once Kariya Kaka, Sundar Kaka, Lelaha, and Bachanu came to Devnandan. As soon as Kariya Kaka arrived, Phonch Bhai asked-

"Kariya Bhai, all the work seems settled, but I do not see the ghee and the incense."

Phonch Bhai was once a hanger-on of the local landlord. The landlordship itself no longer existed, nor the landlord, but one shadow remained: for five years now, Dhilababu had been alive. Fields and lands had diminished, but the courtly manner remained. Even now, servants were kept to grind bhang, prepare betel, give massages, walk alongside, and cook. Phonch Bhai was that very companion on walks.

Hearing Phonch Bhai's words, something stirred within Kariya Kaka. Sundar Kaka felt a quiet relief that the question had not been put to him.

In Kariya Kaka's mind arose images he had seen with his own eyes: someone throwing the body into the river current, someone burying it at the river's edge; someone burning it with mango wood, another with bagur wood (a thorny tree); some burning with dry stalks and dung chips, others lighting the pyre with fire in the deceased mouth and then burying the body into the earth. In such moments, what use was there for ghee or incense?

Hearing Phonch Bhai's words, Bachanu spoke up-

"Phonch Kaka, let me tell you of something we ourselves went through. My grandmother died. For three days before her death, both mother and son were already there. What I saw with my own eyes was my maternal grandfather's orchard. In the years when our own orchard did not bear fruit, we would go there. We ate our fill for a month and a half, without restraint.

In the third year, when the Kosi brought devastation, who could even tell my uncle that the region's orchards, saplings, and bamboo groves had been uprooted. All the women in the courtyard were crying over Grandmother, while my uncle was crying for firewood to cremate her. It felt like two kinds of weeping. Just as one tune, sung by different singers, comes out in the same melody, so it is with death too. Hearing my uncle cry, I went close and asked him. He said- 'I am not grieving because my sister has died. Grief comes when, while parents are alive, a son or daughter dies. But the orchard we had in the east was planted by my mother and father. They tended it like children. On the northern side they had planted one row of sarahi mangoes; the rest were all grafted varieties. But sarahi was sarahi: enormous trees. They bore few fruits, and even those

were not sweet, mostly sour. But the grafted ones were carefully chosen. From the very start of Rohini, Gulab Khas and Doma Bombay began to ripen. Before they even finished ripening, Krishna Bhog and Ladduba would start. After that, Maldah would ripen. Maldah would scarcely finish, and Kalkatiya would begin. As soon as Kalkatiya ripened, Faizli, Mohar, Thakur, and Rair would follow.'"

When I asked him about this order, he said-

"Son, every variety of mango has its own use. When it is time for the pyre, cutting branches from grafted trees takes months of deliberation. But that is not the case with sarahi. Yes, even sarahi gains value only when it becomes as large and flavoursome as grafted trees. The need for firewood is for both hearth and corpse. It is not only for burning. After death, even trees are offered in sacrifice. That is why large trees are best."

The idea of cutting and burning seemed understandable, but sacrifice did not. Those trees had been planted with care, by his own choice. My grandfather had died before the Kosi's terrible flood, so he was cremated with fine wood, sarahi mango wood. One tree was given to the priest and the great Priest (each). He received the full reward of planting a complete orchard. But what of my grandmother? How was she to be cremated, and what was to be given in charity?

Hearing my uncle speak, I felt both sorrow and anger. When something existed, we enjoyed it. Now that it does not, why cry? I said to him-

"Uncle, if crying drove away sorrow and brought happiness, would the world be as it is? You keep the body in the courtyard and cry. Come, we have our ways. We know how to dig a hole and burn the effigy with dry dung

fuel. How to burn with dry stalks, with fallen wood, with bad wood, and even with green bamboo and reed."

Hearing Bachanu, everyone fell silent. But Phonch Bhai was seized with anger. Grinding his teeth, he said-

"A jackal born in Sawan, seeing the flood that came in Bhadon, says, 'I have never seen such a flood before.' My own teeth and nails have fallen out watching these things, and you come to instruct me."

Kariya Kaka looked towards Sundar Kaka. Sundar Kaka had already been watching Kariya Kaka. Seeing both of them turn their eyes away from Phonch Bhai, Lelaha fixed his gaze on Phonch Bhai and spoke sharply-

"Phonch Bhai, I will call you bhai only so long as you too understand what it means to be a brother. You are wearing clothes worth a thousand rupees, a watch worth a thousand, and a mobile worth ten thousand. But look at me as well. I have as much claim on Raghunandan Kaka and Dev Bhai as you do. It is not that if you speak, I will simply lie down flat. The final rites will be done, one way or another. This work belongs neither to your family alone nor to mine alone. We have come here to do the work; whatever the household directs, that is what will be done. What will you gain by turning petty?"

Hearing Lelaha, Phonch Bhai shrank back. Changing his tone, he said-

"Oh, Lelahu, you lost your temper. When ten people sit together, ten kinds of talk will arise. There is no need to flare up so much. It is over such small matters that society breaks apart. Just as we have lived together till now, we will continue to do so."

Seeing the atmosphere cool, Sundar Kaka rose from the threshold and went over to Jibach, saying-

"The time for the batgavni (departure song) is approaching. Keep it in mind."

Then he came back to the threshold and said to Kariya Kaka,

"Kisun, this is no time to sit. Sitting will only delay the work."

"Yes, yes, that is true,"

Saying this, Kariya Kaka got up. As soon as he rose, many others rose as well. Inside, Phonch Bhai was burning. His lips trembled as he muttered-

"Everyone does as he pleases. There is no restraint, no regard for what our fathers and grandfathers did."

Rising from the threshold, Phonch Bhai began pacing towards the courtyard. Darkness surged within him. He stared hard at all the work being done, trying to find where the fault lay. But his gaze never reached the root of the fault. Had it reached there, he might have understood that fault creates disorder within what is already customary, not within what is newly arranged.

On the threshold, Chanchal was building a bamboo platform, while Bauku was twisting Sabe hay for the ropes. Rolling his eyes, Phonch Bhai began measuring the length and breadth of the platform. As he set a plank in place, Chanchal smiled and said-

"Careful, Bhai, don't cast an evil eye."

Chanchal's smile struck Phonch Bhai's chest like a poisoned arrow. He was about to say something when, suddenly, a loud commotion rose from the northern hamlet. Wherever people were, they pricked up their ears and listened. The cause of the uproar was a quarrel between Adhuliya and Aparajit.

Manohar's family belonged to Raghunandan's kin through the sister's line. For three generations, Manohar's people had lived in this village. His grandfather had come and settled in his in-laws' home. Yet the family that Manohar belonged to worked alongside the kin group, standing with them in labour and responsibility, just as one of their own.

At the last weekly cattle market, Manohar sold a cow for twenty thousand rupees and, even better, managed to purchase a young bullock in the neighbouring village for thirty thousand. He arranged the remaining money within fifteen days. When he worked out the accounts, he saw that after selling the cow for twenty thousand, the man who had been raising the calves said that if both calves were sold, he himself would rear a cow. Raising calves, after all, suits those who also work the land. Just as a man who sits in a new car feels pleasure every day, so too does a ploughman feel joy when he yokes a new bullock. There is no need to change gears, no need to adjust speed. Why would there be? Between one's own fields, there are no crossroads or junctions. Whatever pace one wishes to plough at, one loads the plough and moves. In a single opening, the furrow is laid clean.

The poor man who had raised the calves owned no land. He was trying to turn a small investment into something larger. And why blame him? At the very last market, illness struck in such a way that both calves were lost. Still, his thoughts were generous. One day, he hoped, his thin cow would become a strong milker.

Seeing how times turned, Manohar placed the twenty thousand rupees inside a plank-fronted cupboard built into the wall, among his books. It was an open rack.

On it lay only the Bhagavat, the Devi Bhagavat, Sukhsagar, Yogavashishta, Kabir Mansur, the Bible, the Quran, and the Krishna–Uddhav Dialogue. Inside the Krishna–Uddhav Dialogue, he slipped the twenty-thousand-rupee notes between the pages and kept them safe.

Yesterday, Sohan came and, telling Manohar's mother, took the Krishna–Uddhav Dialogue with him. There was no question of turning the pages to check. Not even a trace of suspicion existed.

In the evening, when Manohar went to take out the book by the light of the lantern, he did not find the Krishna–Uddhav Dialogue. A doubt rose in his mind. But it was not the doubt of theft. There was constant exchange of books between the two households. He asked his mother-

"Mother, has Sohan Bhai taken the book as well?"

"Yes."

"Was there anything inside it?"

"I did not open it to see."

Manohar fell silent. He thought of going at once to ask. Then another voice within said that matters of money should not be pursued late at night; it would not be proper. He sat down with the lantern placed in front of him. But darkness pressed in on his mind, and sorrow grew heavier. He said to his mother- "Mother, my mind feels unsettled. I will not eat."

Before she could insist, the thought came to her that eating suits a calm mind. For a troubled mind, it is another matter altogether.

After thinking for a moment, the mother said to her daughter-in-law, Adhuliya-

“Daughter, your husband’s heart is weighed down. I do not feel like eating either.”

The daughter-in-law snapped back,

“When I was half-cooked standing by the hearth, that is when his heart grew heavy? As if only he feels this way. The vegetables are already cooked, and the rotis were made earlier. Let him eat in the morning. His mind will settle then.”

But again, the poor woman’s thoughts turned to her husband and mother-in-law. If the food cooked for them would not be eaten, then what of her own hunger? She covered everything and set it aside.

At dawn, as soon as Manohar heard that Raghuni Bhai had passed away, he came and sat quietly to one side at the threshold, his head bowed. Everyone could see that among all in the village, Manohar was the one in deepest grief. An immeasurable sorrow. Mother followed him soon after.

Seeing the courtyard empty, Adhuliya could not hold back her hunger. The poor woman took four rotis and some fried vegetables and began to eat. Just then, Aparajit came and called out to her from the threshold-

“Daughter-in-law, has Aunt gone?”

With her mouth full of roti and vegetables, Adhuliya replied indistinctly. Sensing something was off, Aparajit hurried into the courtyard and saw that, right in the middle on the raised earthen platform, someone was sitting, hunched over, eating greedily.

Just as venom rises instantly when a snake is struck, rage surged through Aparajit. Yet Adhuliya kept chewing, unconcerned. The more Adhuliya’s mouth moved, the

more Aparajit's hunger turned into burning resentment.

Adhuliya realised that if she delayed even a little, she would be caught red-handed. If not that, then before Aparajit could open her mouth to scold, she quickly finished eating and put the plate aside.

Bursting beyond restraint, Aparajit lunged forward and shouted-

"Hey, you shameless woman, do you have no shame in your body at all?"

Until then, Adhuliya did not speak. She washed the plate, rinsed her hands, set the water pot in place, and then replied-

"You Have plenty of shame, the kind that invents false grief and piles it up. I am the one without shame, am I? An old woman lying like this is respectable, and I am the shameless one?"

"Hey, don't you have even this much sense? Until the body is lifted from the courtyard, why did you put food in your mouth? First the courtyard and the house must be set right, only then do we cook and eat."

"This is his kin group, not mine. I am only a sister's daughter-in-law. Even one's own brother becomes a stranger when he lives elsewhere, and distant people become one's own when they stay close. What duty do I have toward this courtyard and house?"

Adhuliya's words threw Aparajit completely off balance. She snapped back- "Isn't one's sense shaped by one's lineage and stock?"

Feeling the weight of that insult to her family, Adhuliya lost control and retorted- "If your lineage is so noble, then what stopped you from coming quietly like a

human being and standing nearby? If you saw me eating, you could have asked- 'Daughter, why are you doing this?' It did not even occur to you to understand that I had not eaten all night. Instead, you arrived only to hand out hollow sermons. You could have gone on doing your own work with your eyes shut. Why was it necessary to interfere with me?"

Yet Aparajit, too, stayed within her limits, and the sharpness remained in her voice. She did not listen to even half of what Adhuliya said- absorbed instead in her own flow of words. Still, a doubt crept into her mind: perhaps she was now standing in another's courtyard, and blame might be pinned on her. Slowly, step by backward step, increasing the force of her voice as the distance grew, she took her leave. But matters did not end there.

From one or two nearby lanes, girls and children began arriving in clusters. The women followed, drawn as if by instinct. Even the woman from Mahinathpur, still smearing cow-dung, came with her hands soiled and agitated. The woman from Navani, who had gone to pluck flowers, reached clutching her basket. Most astonishing of all was the woman from Nonaur: though her child was crying for food, she arrived after piling four extra tasks on herself. The woman from Lakhanour came in angrily, setting a plate of rice and lentils before her child, feeling she had been left behind, and rushed in shouting.

The scene turned strange. Each spoke according to her own impulse, hurling abuse at the woman she considered her opponent. No one was prepared to listen. But as the shouting continued, mouths grew sore, tempers cooled, and sense began to return. Gradually, the noise subsided. Bit by bit, the uproar faded into silence.

Yet beneath that surface, two camps had quietly taken shape, each preparing its own verbal weapons. There was no clear leader among them.

Until now, the old women of the eastern and western hamlets had been looked to as informal leaders. But neither possessed the judgement leadership demands. The grandmother from the eastern hamlet had not come; she had been unwell for four days, and today was her Ekadashi fast. She did not even have the strength to rise from her bedding.

The grandmother from the western hamlet, who saw life itself in her one and a half bighas of land, had gone with her husband to fetch an extra bundle of fodder after collecting their own cow-dung and leaves. That was why she had not arrived. Some in the village muttered sly remarks about her absence, but she was not one to turn back at words. The moment she sensed foolish chatter, she would march straight to the courtyard and pour scorn on everyone.

Now, no one dared call anyone a mere cow-dung gatherer again.

Pacing in from the courtyard, Phonch Bhai reached the bamboo platform and began to inspect it with darting eyes. But the work was still incomplete, and he could not quite place himself in it. Finding no foothold in the world of labour, he stepped into the world of words and asked Batthu-

“How big will the platform be?”

Placing the string along the plank and marking a line with his fingernail, Batthu replied-

“Up to here.”

"You seem confused."

"How so?"

"That's already three and a half cubits. And if there's not even a span forward or back, how will it work?"

Batthu fell silent.

Lelaha, standing nearby, had been listening. For the moment, he held back, hoping the man being questioned would answer first. If he could argue his point, all the better. If not, Lelaha thought, he was present; Batthu Bhai wouldn't be pushed back too far.

Seeing Batthu silent, Lelaha spoke. "Phonch Bhai, Batthu Bhai here is older than you. His body has been worn down by work. Even then, he never failed to understand that those who know a task must lend their hand to it. At that time, you had no such duty. But tell me, how many platforms have we built in our lives, and how many bodies have we burned? Yes, this much is true. If we have burned or buried a single man without a group, then that was a body that never needed a platform at all. It was lifted straight from the bed and taken to the cremation ground. We learned platform-measurement in the school of life, and we learned how to reckon it as well. Have you understood that?"

Hearing Lelaha, Phonch Bhai began to bristle. Tears rose in his eyes, born of anger or of fear; Lelaha could not tell. Lelaha strained his ears for a reply. But seeing no answer coming, he continued. "We have burned and buried dozens of bodies where, instead of four bearers, just two men lifted them on a bamboo frame, tied with rope, and carried them from the courtyard to the cremation ground. There is no time now to list all the things we have done like that. Otherwise…"

From the courtyard, Phonch Bhai came up to the threshold, lips trembling, and with folded hands said to Devnandan, “Count me present for the kathiyari.”

“All right, all right. Is even this not enough?”

Phonch Bhai took his leave from the threshold, but inside his mind a wilderness rose, dark and tangled. His feet would not move forward. Again and again he turned back to look. On this side, there was bustle and confusion about lifting the bier and proceeding for the kathiyari. Groups of women and children, drawn by the lure of the music, came forward and stood watching. Some people said that a wife should not go as far as the cremation ground. Others argued that those who have no sons, their wives themselves light the pyre, so how can it be forbidden?

The same question arose about children. This is the rite of final passage, where a ditch is dug, wood is cut and burned. What would children gain by going there idly? Yet it is ritual itself that gives rise to discipline. Even placing fire at the mouth of the bier is a discipline. Who does not need it? Today’s children will be tomorrow’s adults. To turn them away from work, therefore, is not right. Still, the amount of work is limited; it can be done by only so many hands. Then what is the task for such a crowd? And what is the role of music? Is the task merely to burn the body, or also to carry it, like a daughter, from one place to another?

Here the instruments droned on. A rehearsal of different kinds of sohar tunes, departure-songs, and garden songs was played in every body’s mind. Kariya Kaka and Sundar Kaka were working hard. The sweat from their chests soaked through their clothes, and both were deeply troubled. Their own resolve faltered. Help

was needed. But from whom?

Kariya Kaka's eyes went to Sundar Bhai. Sundar Kaka's eyes went to Kisun. From where they stood, both rose and signalled with their eyes towards the shade of the chaumas hedge. They had taken barely four steps in that direction when Lelaha called out from behind, "Kaka, where are you slipping off to? The work is here, and you are leaving towards the fields?"

Lelaha's words pierced both of them straight through the chest. Their restless minds cried out-

"He has cut in so sharply. What will people think?"

Yet their condition was like that of a beggar shamed in court; there was no escape. Breaking into forced laughter, both spoke together-

"When a crowd gathers, miracles happen. Come then, son, you come here too."

The three of them sat down in the shade of the chaumas hedge and began to review the work. But two questions stood before them: burning the body and going to the kathiyari. Some people would have to labour hard, from cutting wood to digging a ditch. Others would simply sit with bowed heads, observing mourning. It takes nearly an hour and a quarter for a body to burn, and besides that there is work involved in chopping and splitting the firewood, as well as arranging the pyre.

At home, too, there had already been heavy labour. And after working for two hours, it is only natural to feel like eating or drinking something.

In between, Lelaha blurted out-

"Would anyone even feel like eating there?"

Sundar Lal said- "Rubbish, you fool. Have you

forgotten that you eat every day in the agricultural field or groves?”

Lelaha drew in his mouth and scolded himself inwardly.

“I spoke without thinking.”

The three of them decided that the women of the house, who would not go to the cremation ground, should be informed to send at least two rounds of tea and, according to the number of people, some dry snacks and water. They themselves would keep watch, giving more to those who worked harder. If nothing was taken there, it would become a problem. As long as children’s stomachs were full, they would keep dancing around; once hunger began to churn, they would head back home. They would reach the kitchen without even washing their hands and feet. So even they had to be kept occupied and fed.

Of course, there were some people who would not take anything at all. How could they? There is a boundary in life where the question stands directly before one, and at such a moment it is not right to push or pull anyone beyond measure.

In Sundar Kaka’s mind arose the thought that disputes over boundaries can turn one field into two, one village into two, even one world into two. Some embrace death calmly; others weep and wail. In auspicious work, eating and drinking are considered proper.

A faint laugh escaped his lips. Just then Lelaha’s eyes fell on Sundar Kaka’s face. Seeing the smile, doubt rose in him that perhaps he had again said something out of place. His pride flared, and he said-

“Kaka, the more we delay, the more delay there will

be. If it gets too late, many people will fall ill.”

The three of them came out together from the hedge to the threshold and called out in one voice- “Ram-nām satya hai.”

Ah, what a moment. Once again, there was commotion around the bamboo platform. Some cried out that they could never repay Kaka’s kindness while he was alive, so how could they not lift him now? Others said that Kaka, whether as elder or as brother, had once carried their parents, so they must lift him. Some argued that in difficult times he had helped with money, so should they not now repay their debt?

Hearing the clamour from the hedge, Lelaha felt a surge of energy. Waving both hands at the crowd, he shouted- “Listen and move in properly. Lift him shoulder to shoulder, or if it becomes uneven, it will hurt.”

Accepting Lelaha’s judgement, four men stepped forward to lift the bier. The moment they reached it, a single thought rose on every face at once: this is not just Raghunandan being carried; it is his bier that is being lifted.

Subhadra’s eyes began to flow like a branch of the Kosi, like a mountain stream that descends onto the plains and keeps running without pause.

As the bier moved out of the courtyard, from one side came the chant “Ram-nām satya hai”, and from the other, from the shehnai, the tune played when a sister is sent away from her home. This is the same world where joy and sorrow walk side by side.

At the threshold of the house, Kariya Kaka stood on one side and Sundar Kaka on the other. Both bowed in final salutation and stepped forward. After them,

Devnandan was given the fire in his hand and sent on. Then the procession was formed. Once everyone had moved out, Subhadra and Sheela stopped behind.

At the proper moment, Kariya Kaka reminded Sheela about tea, dry snacks and water, and then followed at the rear like a railway guard walking behind his train.

When they reached the grove, people began looking for Kariya Kaka and Sundar Kaka. Devnandan too raised his head and searched, but saw both of them coming along the same path.

On reaching the grove, Kariya Kaka went ahead and pointed with his finger, saying-

"Here is where Bhai used to build his watch platform and hut."

Then, pointing to the north-eastern corner, he added-

"And here is where he used to sit most of the time. It would be best to place him in between."

Turning to Lelaha, he said-

"Lelahu, come. Let us first look at the firewood."

Kariya Kaka, Sundar Kaka, Lelaha, Bachanu and Chanchal moved ahead. On the other side, Jibach, Chhitan and Ranglal adjusted their positions and lifted their instruments.

There was a single mango graft of the Maldah variety, and around it, on all four sides, sheesham, jamun and gamhair trees. Not a single mango tree stood straight; all were bent and twisted like Ashtavakra. Even so, Lelaha felt it improper to sacrifice a living tree for death and turned his eyes away from the mango.

Looking towards the gamhair, Lelaha said- "Gamhair

Maharaj and Jamun Maharaj are such that they themselves will not easily perish, and even a dead body will not burn properly with their wood."

Hearing this, Sundar Kaka and Kariya Kaka exchanged a glance and smiled. But Lelaha's words made Chanchal's anger flare. It blazed up like dry kindling catching fire.

"Listen, Sundar Kaka," he said- "just as jamun wood is watery, gamhair is the same. Mango would be better. It is drier. And even drier is ilchi. Why drag such trouble into the work without reason? If you look, the sheesham on the southern side is already dry. For burning a body, one needs fuel that catches and holds flame well."

Everyone moved toward the southern side of the grove. Ten or fifteen sheesham trees had dried up the previous year due to disease. Among them, only three or four were of usable size; the rest were uneven and poor. If thin trees were cut, four or five would be needed. Otherwise, it would be better to cut two good ones so that the work could be done properly and a little wood would still remain.

But Lelaha's gaze dropped downward. He asked-

"Kaka, how much wood does it take to burn a body?"

Kariya Kaka had heard such things all his life, but he had never read them written anywhere. Still, it would not do to leave the question unanswered. Even if he said plainly that he did not know, how could he, after having done so much work together, suddenly appear foolish?

Snapping back, he said- "Hey Lelaha, do you think I am a cheat that you ask such a question? All those bodies we have burned together, I have seen them with open eyes, while you were sleeping with yours shut."

Hearing Kariya Kaka's words, Lelaha lowered his gaze. In his mind was the thought that this was funeral wood, and that burning too much was not right. If they took wood from the base, it would leave the household bare later. Better would be to cut and stack some beyond the graft boundary and take it back afterward. But before he could speak further, Kariya Kaka had already snapped.

Seeing his mood sour, Lelaha decided it was better to speak plainly and settle it. He said- "Kaka, we are both brothers. There is plenty of wood. What if we cut from below and think of making doors or shutters later?"

Quietly calculating, Kariya Kaka replied-

"After setting aside enough for the ritual, leave the head and foot ends whole and split the upper part. I will go and look after the next task."

Saying this, he took up the hoe, measured the strike for the axe, and told Jholi to prepare the chopping tools. Jholi laughed and said- "Brothers, listen. I too am growing old, but as long as there is strength in my arms, I will keep carrying society's burden and digging graves. I have dug graves for one hundred twenty-five men older than me. I never got the chance to do it for someone younger."

With that, Jholi began digging. At the same moment, Jibach lifted the shehnai and began to play-

"Day and night I remember Him, yet in this world none is truly one's own..."

The funeral bed was dug. Thick sheesham logs were placed at the head and foot, thicker than the bedding on which Raghunandan had ever slept in his life. Layer by layer, with the wood pieces the pyre rose, chest-high. Raghunandan Kaka lay ready, prepared to burn amid wood.

Sundar Kaka took Devnandan by the arm and pressed the blazing fire into his mouth.

The moment the flame touched his lips, Raghunandan surged into everyone's mind like a flash of lightning. Grand-father, Father, uncle, elder brother, younger brother, husband, son, child, little Nunnu, thousands of forms began to scatter and drift, like pater flowers blown into the air. Just as a single stalk of Pater bears thousands, even lakhs, of full blossoms, Raghunandan too broke into countless colours and shapes, fluttering silently within every heart.

Bidding good-by from the courtyard, Subhadra and Shila remained behind. In Shila's mind ran the practical thought of arranging tea and refreshments. Subhadra, meanwhile, was thinking that the household hearth had dried up completely. How would it stay moist for a whole month? There was no one left to manage things, as the daughter-in-law has to organise several other things of the house. It seemed best to sprinkle a glass of water and sweep the courtyard clean, washing everything out. From the fourth day onward, the house and courtyard would again see daily activity. So she did just that.

From the grove, Bauku and Shitala came carrying tea and snacks. After handing over everything to both of them shila became restful. Amid the noise and excitement of the children, Asha had already gone off, following behind the shehnai player.

By then, Subhadra had finished sweeping and settling the courtyard. At that moment, Shila said to her- "Ma, shall we sit somewhere and talk about him?"

Subhadra replied- "Yes, child. Let us go to the place where he lay permanently asleep. The tulsi plant is right

beside it."

They had barely sat down when Lohanawali Dadi arrived, breathless and flustered. Seeing her, Shila said- "Come, Dadi, come into the courtyard. There are only the two of us here."

Seeing that the courtyard and house had not been ritually prepared, a quiet, smouldering anger rose inside Lohanawali. Still, suppressing it, she said to Subhadra- "Sister-in-law, you are older than I am, but it is not possible to remember every rule and custom. There is one more rite to be observed."

"What is it?" Subhadra asked.

"For the husband, a stone must be placed upon the forehead."

Smiling gently, Subhadra replied-

"Yes, yes. I remember that too."

"Then do not sit now. Let us go."

Saying this, Lohanawali took her leave.

"Very well, very well. Go," Subhadra said.

And once again, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law returned to the old man's sleeping place and sat down, tears spilling quietly from their eyes.

Smiling, Shila said- "Ma, did you ever quarrel with the old man?"

"The old man went from this world straight to heaven. I never let anger rise against him. That is what my parents taught me. But far more than what my mother and father taught me, the old man himself taught me. He would always say that the one we call a human being is only a frame of flesh and bone. It is the mind that makes a person human. Whatever the mind becomes, that is what

the person becomes. And the kind of person one becomes decides how much space one finds in other people's hearts.

Space too is of two kinds. One is good, the other harmful. A person must always keep good thoughts in the mind."

Shila broke in gently-

"But in a family there are household burdens, marriages, rituals and obligations. How did he manage all that?"

"My child, when there is important work in the family, even the hearth has more to do. But always remember this: manage your own work, and also help with the work of others.

If even a few people in a family become like that, then just as in a clump of bamboo–the new shoots, the three-year-old stalks, even the thorny ones–all stand together, and you see how tall even the slender bamboo grows, how the thorny canes hold everything together. That thorny cane is like helping with another's work beyond one's own. In the same way, relationships will remain bound together–from family to village, from village to state and nation–not scattered and broken. But people today have grown slack of mind. The results of that are plain to see." ❑

2.

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In the pitch-dark hours of dawn, Subhadra shook Shila awake and said- “Child, get up. Quickly, get up.”

Hearing her mother-in-law’s urgent voice, Shila sat up and asked- “What has happened that you are waking me at such an unearthly hour?”

“Speak calmly. The village people have not yet woken. Move our work ahead.”

“What work?”

“As soon as one or two people wake, the ghosts will begin to arrive. You are newly married, and on top of that, you have lived in towns and markets. You do not recognise the village’s ghosts. The old man recognised them all and taught me. For now, listen carefully. Otherwise life will be unsettled.

The old man has died but it does not mean that everyone else will die with him. Everyone has their own share of food and fate. Still, I am telling you again. We will have the whole day to talk. People from society will ask all sorts of things and understand in their own way.

For now, quickly take out the biscuit tin and make tea. By then, I will give the son a toothbrush and return. There is no fuel left in the hearth. Take some ash, rub it

between your hands, scrub your teeth, and drink a little water."

Saying this, Subhadra went to the verandah to wake Devnandan. On the very cot where Raghunandan had slept, Devnandan now lay. Placing her hand on his body and gently rocking him, she said- "Son, son, get up. Take this toothbrush first and wash your face and hands."

Understanding the rites of death, Devnandan asked no questions. He obeyed his mother's instructions without a word and began to clean himself. Subhadra too washed her face, rinsed her mouth, and sat on the courtyard platform.

Shila came toward her husband with a plate holding four small biscuits and a glass of water. Seeing the plate and glass in Shila's hands, Subhadra said- "If there is no puffed rice or flatbread, then bring the big packet, the four-hundred-gram one, and give him biscuits from that."

Shila did as she was told. While sipping tea, Subhadra began to speak.

"In our own household, all the rites are completed within thirteen days. But in other hamlets of this village, for some families the rituals finish on the fifteenth day, for some on the seventeenth, and for others only after a full month.

Do you understand why I woke you so early today? Today, all at once, the son will have to eat a single meal before dawn, before offering the ritual arghasan to the old man. Now tell me this. A person who eats something or the other all day like a monkey, how will he remain unfed from morning till night?

The old man was his life companion, but it was I who carried the boy in my womb for ten months. If I do not

understand how to nourish him, will a man understand it better?

I am telling you this now because no one else is here. It makes no difference to me. My body has been disciplined through a life of restraint. But you two are not like that. Understand this clearly. People call it ghosts, but they are people.

When the courtyard lies empty and hunger rises, go inside the house and eat. The rites prescribed for the old man, and the customs we follow as part of society, will proceed according to social convention. But we must also keep this in mind: when sorrow already weighs on the heart, if we also abandon food and water, will we also die with him?

While he lived, we served and cared for him. That was our duty. Let me tell you a story, child. Not a tale, but something seen with my own eyes."

Pointing with her finger toward a hamlet, she said-

"There is a house of a man called Phusna in that hamlet. It has not been very long, but still it must be twenty-five or thirty years ago. Phusna's grand-father died. He was the family's breadwinner. How could they offer arghasan to the dead, and how could Phusna himself eat once a day?

Still, borrowing small amounts from here and there, they somehow managed. Without income, how could a family survive? With barely enough to eat, the children grew thin and weak. Anxiety drained both husband and wife day by day.

Seeing the children's faces, poor Phusna's mother could not tolerate the heart-pain. There were the mother's Utari (a part of the coffin worn for mourning) around the

son's neck and the father's Utari around the father's neck. And on top of that, twenty days later came the intercalary month."

Tears began to stream from both her eyes.

Seeing the Saraswati-like flow from Subhadra's eyes, an involuntary exclamation escaped Shila's lips-

"What strength of patience. No tears for her own grief, yet a river for another's."

After finishing his tea and chewing paan, Padhua Bhai said to his wife-

"I may get delayed. In the meantime, if anyone asks for me, tell them I have gone to enquire at Devnandan's place."

"Why go right now?"

"One has to think beyond what comes naturally to mind," he said- and stepped forward.

From behind, his wife said-

"Alright, go."

On the road, Padhua Bhai began to reflect. He was educated. He understood what was written in books and spoke of it to others. But if one's own family did not understand, what value did one's learning truly have? After all, as long as the eyes can see and the power to think and reflect remains, that is the burden one must carry. If not, then are the scriptures not also meant for those who have no one left to call their own?

His thoughts began to drift, but his gaze caught and held on his wife's question.

Dressed in modern clothes, Devnandan sat alone on the cot like a student in a gurukul, facing south. He was eating biscuits, drinking water and sipping tea when Shila

came carrying a cigarette pack and matches. She placed them in front of him, took the empty glass and stood there.

Three or four sips of tea still remained in the cup, but the strain that had weighed on his mind had eased a little. Smiling toward Shila, he looked at her with half-closed eyes. The burden of work showed in her eyes. Her husband's smile was like striking a match to a handful of dry straw in the hearth of her mind. The flame flared, and with it the work moved forward.

She said-

"From today, people from the community will come asking about arrangements. Would it be right not to offer them anything to eat or drink?"

"Not at all," Devnandan replied.

The smile within his mind, seeing his great debt beginning to be repaid, surfaced as a faint laugh.

"What things do we have in the house?"

"Tea leaves, sugar, a tin of milk, cigarettes and matches are already there. Beyond that, I do not yet know what else we need to arrange."

Letting his burden ease, Devnandan said-

"I do not fully understand village customs myself. I will call Kariya Kaka and ask him."

"Alright then. The crows have begun to caw. Quickly, have a cigarette. Otherwise the smell of the unlit cigarette will linger and people will wake."

Understanding his wife's practical sense, Devnandan handed the glass in her hand and began to smoke. In his mind arose the thought that the two of them might be outsiders here, but his mother had lived in the village all

her life. She knew all the customs and rituals.

Just then, the biscuit settled. He smacked his lips thoughtfully. As he was flicking away the cigarette stub, his eyes fell on Padhua Kaka. Seeing him, he called out from the cot- “Asha.”

Shila understood her husband’s cue. While preparing tea on the gas stove, she said to Asha,

“Buchi, go and look from the corner of the courtyard to see how many people are there.”

Running out and returning, Asha went to her mother and said- “There are two people sitting near Baba.”

Padhua Kaka came over and quietly fell into silence. Two minutes passed before he opened his eyes. As soon as he saw Asha offering a cup of tea, something within him stalled, the way the mind freezes when one suddenly notices a body lying beside a railway track. In the meantime, he saw that Devnandan had already taken two sips. A restlessness rose inside him.

Ordinarily, after a death, one should obserserve sestraint till the day of trimming hair and nails at the very least till th day of covering ashes. But then again, should mourning be observed at the death of an old person, or should it be understood as fulfilment? If mourning alone were observed, would that not go against the order of nature itself? Yet tradition has its own weight. Until now, certain rules have taken shape along with the chief mourner, the family, and society. And it is people like us who carry them forward.

In such a situation, what should be done? Moreover, the man here is a newly arrived doctor. Would his conscience not be troubled?

There is no fixed boundary to dying. The old die, the young die, children die. Then everyone must strive to make their own life long. That is why people cling so tightly to their lives. But before doing anything alone, it is necessary to ask others as well. Yet who was nearby to be consulted? Trusting one's own judgement can lead one far astray. Still, seeing Devnandan drinking tea brought a sense of reassurance.

Taking a sip of tea himself, he began to think. In their society, the rites stretch over thirteen days, from cremation to the twelfth-day rituals. Just as the body is taken from the house to the grove and consigned to the earth and trees, so too the work there is completed and one returns home. Now the work of the household would begin.

Then another thought arose. In the rush of duties, curiosity too inevitably arises. Again his mind wandered. When he calculated the thirteen days, it seemed to fit. But curiosity does not begin only after the courtyard has been cleared, the iron and stones removed, and people have returned to their homes.

For society, one process has already been completed. It is also possible that some people were not present earlier and returned only after the cremation. When should they be included in the collective rites? If they are included after the period of restraint, they will be counted as companions of the final rites, companions of the cremation itself.

But just as, while digging earth, many different colours of soil merge into one, here too, after much mental digging, no smooth answer emerged. The layers were shallow, wetter than expected. Suddenly it became

clear. A human being must learn to move according to time. Just as the atmosphere keeps changing for many reasons, if human beings do not change, they become stagnant. And what difference is there between stagnation and death?

The more Padhua Kaka thought, the more his mind drifted. Finally he spoke,

"Son, just as when there is no greenery in the fields for three days and cattle wander off to graze on their own, our minds too have wandered before the period of restraint. I am going now. I will come again. Do not worry. Society is an ocean in which creatures ranging from tiny snails to great beings live together in mutual dependence. All strength lies in society."

Saying this, Padhua Kaka set off down the road.

Head bowed, body half covered in cloth, a quilt trailing behind, dhoti hitched above the knees, a towel over his shoulder, Hulan came forward and bowed low before Devnandan at the edge of the courtyard.

Observing proper decorum, Doctor Devnandan rose from the cot, stepped down into the courtyard, and sat on the ground in a crouched posture. He gestured for both Hulan and his companion to sit as well.

Hulan tightened his lips and said-

"Sir, how can I sit in front of you? I will remain standing."

Even as he spoke, tears began to spill from the eyes of both husband and wife.

Wiping the tears that streamed down his cheeks, Hulan said-

"The village has lost its pillar. As long as Kaka was

alive, there was never a worry that we might be pushed outside society. Others are always looking for a chance to corner us."

"All that about the village can wait. First tell me your work," Devnandan said.

Pressing her husband gently, Gudri spoke-

"Son, Doctor Sahib, you are like a god. Do not hide anything from us. We too have a great deal of work. One whole day has already passed. On the tenth day, there is the shaving and cleansing ritual. Before that, all the utensils must be prepared and finished. In between, only eight days remain. There are just the two of us to work. The children go to school."

Hearing the woman's words, Subhadra and Shila came from the courtyard to the verandah. As soon as Subhadra arrived, she said to Gudri-

"Child, you have not brought the tools and implements? Now the work of winnowing baskets and sieves will be needed. Make sure you gather and mend them."

"No, Aunt, we have not brought anything yet. Tomorrow afternoon we will come and do the work. For now, we have only come to understand what utensils are needed."

"Good, good. But remember one thing. Just as the old man loved large bamboo umbrella, you should prepare similar one."

Hearing the word bamboo umbrella, Hulan smiled and said-

"Aunt, when Lord Vishnu took the form of Vamana, even he wore bamboo umbrella. Compared to that, Kaka's

umbrella would be greater. It could shelter five families beneath it.”

Subhadra then said to Devnandan-

“Son, you do not know much about village matters. We women do. This is work related to death and mourning. Call Kariya Kaka as well.”

As soon as Subhadra said this, Gudri left to call Kariya Kaka.

Devnandan asked Hulan-

“What work do you do for a living?”

At the mention of livelihood, Hulan faltered. He remembered his pigs. His voice grew hurried and shaken as he began to speak,

“Brother, no one does good for the poor. The poor keep begging at temples. Just as no amount of chanting removes the poison of a cobra, mere devotion to Dindayal brings no relief.

This is the same village where Dhanesar once held a feast. We too gathered our pots and scraps and threw the leftovers onto leaves outside. We left our pigs to eat there. Dhanesar’s son is such a wicked creature that he brought Endosulfan to poison fish in the pond. He sprinkled it on the leaves. All the pigs died. From that day, there has been neither capital nor a single animal left at our door.”

Devnandan asked- startled-

“When you have no land and all the pigs died, how do you manage to survive?”

Hearing the question, the hope that had been held tight in Hulan’s heart spilled out.

“Doctor Sahib, society keeps one alive...”

Turning toward Subhadra, he added-

"May God grant Aunt long life. Aunt knows this well. For twelve or thirteen months of the year, the two of us survive on their blessings."

Hearing this, a keen eagerness awakened in Devnandan. Like a hungry man, he asked- "How so?"

Clearing his throat, Hulan began-

"Son, for poor people the months of Aasinh and Kartik are the hardest. But every year, Kaka gives us two bamboo poles right at the beginning of Aasinh. We take those two bamboos, split and shape them, and begin making utensils.

At first, the sales are slow and uneven. But when the flower-sellers arrive, more and more items begin to sell. It is not abundance, but it becomes enough to keep us going. That hope is still alive. As long as Aunt lives, it will remain."

Hearing this, Devnandan was taken aback. A thought rose firmly within him that he would not erase his father's acts of duty and generosity. Never. Smiling, he said-

"Everything that belonged to Baba will remain as it was."

Hulan's hope steadied at Devnandan's words.

Meanwhile, Kariya Kaka was preparing to go to the market. His wife kept explaining things to him-

"All the arrangements for the single-meal observance must be made today. For twelve or thirteen days, everyone will be engaged in his rites. If we do not prepare the salt and oil for the entire thirteen days today itself, will there not be a break in the middle?"

Kariya Kaka listened to his wife while at the same time counting supplies and money in his mind, filling baskets and sacks. Just then, Gudri called out from the threshold- “Kaka, Kaka?”

He lifted his head and saw Gudri the Dom woman. A sinking feeling rose in him. Something was about to go wrong. What it might be, he did not know. His heart dropped.

Gudri repeated sharply-

“Kaka is lost in Kaki today. Why would he listen to anyone else?”

Gudri’s words pierced Kariya Kaka’s chest like an arrow. From the courtyard, he replied-

“I am caught up in some work. I will come shortly.”

But the arrow had already struck deep, cutting away the inner grime. A clear thought arose: before setting out to do any work, why should one assume ill of someone or imagine misfortune? That was only dirt of the mind. A person is the master of his own life and actions. To place blame on others is nothing but cowardice.

Speaking to his wife while keeping Gudri in view, Kariya Kaka said-

“Now that our work has paused, you keep the baskets ready. First let me understand what the Dom woman has come about.”

Leaving the courtyard, Kariya Kaka came to the threshold and asked Gudri-

“Why are you so agitated?”

In a voice weighted with compulsion, Gudri replied-

“Kaka, I am carrying everyone’s burden here. You know how much work the Dom woman has during the

śrāddha period. One day has already passed. On the tenth day, the shaving and cleansing must be done. If all the utensils are not delivered by then, what will people say?"

Kariya Kaka found himself caught in a strange inner conflict. One part of his mind said that the śrāddha work would begin only after the period of restraint, so why rush today. Another part argued that, for serving rice alone, at least four large baskets would be needed, and for holding food and laying it out, another twenty to twenty-five trays would have to be made. Beyond that, the ritual utensils for the śrāddha itself would also be required. Only eight days remained–counting daylight hours–from cutting bamboo to bringing everything home.

It is the misfortune of the poor that two young persons do not allow third to live with them, whether they are mother and father or son and daughter. The thought crossed his mind that it is why a woman turns masculine and a man feminine. He almost smiled. But at once, it felt like stones had rained into ripe barley. Only when one gives advance money does the right to work arise. To block that right would be unjust. If consent is not given now, the burden would be too great to manage later at short notice.

A human being is not an iron machine that can be switched on to produce in bulk. At least four bamboo poles are needed. They would have to be cut, split, shaped, then turned into baskets and trays, and much else besides. No matter how much a woman may scold, she cannot cut bamboo like a man. Even if she could, how would she pull and split it with strength?

Kariya Kaka's mind churned. Then hope stirred. This was Devnandan's responsibility. He himself stood for

society. Even if the two families were bound together like grafted mangoes or joined blossoms, to ignore a human plea would be a betrayal of society. Blindly agreeing to everything would lead to trouble. A human being does not return to this earth twice, even if people talk of repeated births. That thought did not sit lightly on his neck.

Gudri moved ahead briskly, and Kariya Kaka followed, unsettled. After a few steps, Gudri turned back, stood facing him, and burst out-

"Now are you young children that you do not understand? You do not see how demanding the work is. I rise from the bed and plunge straight into labour. At snack time we wash our faces with ash or earth and drink water. Feeding and watering the children, brushing them up and sending them to school, it strikes about ten o'clock. For people like us, does the day rise twice?"

Kariya kaka was unsettled with the words of Gudri speaking in fragments and waving her arms. He snapped back,

"All right... I understand. Whoever does not listen to you will take on the burden of the work."

Saying this, he began thinking to himself. When it comes to work, people hesitate and stammer, but when it is time to give orders, whatever comes to mind is spoken without restraint. Just as building a house requires many kinds of labour, many kinds of materials, many kinds of tools, and many kinds of intelligence, in the same way, to build a human society one must first learn to understand human beings.

As he reached the doorway, Kariya Kaka asked Devnandan,

"Why did you call?"

Before Devnandan could answer, Hulan began to speak, but Kariya Kaka stopped him and said-

"I too have a share in Raghuni Bhai. That is why I will not allow anyone's interference to reduce my part. The work is yours, and you are its master. Whatever is needed, just say so."

Hulan replied-

"Bamboo."

"You have seen the plot. Cut whatever is required from wherever the work can be done."

In between, Subhadra said to Shila-

"Daughter-in-law, give her advance money."

Shila quickly brought the money from the courtyard and placed it in Gudri's hand. Taking the money, Gudri said-

"I will come tomorrow and tie the winnowing trays and baskets, Aunt."

As the work lightened, Kariya Kaka thought to himself that not even half an hour had passed; if he hurried a little, he would make it in time. Otherwise, it might get late, though such delays often happen when work gathers pace.

Meanwhile, he noticed the couple–Hulan and Gudri–walking a short distance ahead, then falling back, talking among themselves.

"If there is anything like a royal court, it is this, everything at one's command. These days there are so many new people around. Otherwise, Father used to say that Raghuni Bhai's father had given five bighas of land to his daughter in her dowry. If he had not done so, what would have become of a child widow?"

Lost in her own thoughts, Gudri did not really hear what Hulan was saying. Just then, Kariya Kaka called out to Hulan,

"Take the food grain with you. Come in the afternoon and take the bamboo poles too. There should be no interruption in the work."

Subhadra rose and went into the courtyard. Shila followed her. Hulan stood at the doorway, while Gudri went into the courtyard to fetch the food grains.

Hulan then said to Kariya Kaka- "Kariya Kaka, as long as we live, these relationships will remain. But now even Doctor Bhai has begun living outside, and our own sons and daughters are leaving their trades behind."

Kariya Kaka took Hulan's words in a practical sense. But Devnandan's gaze turned inward, towards his own future life. He began thinking to himself. Not every week, nor every month, but the three seasons that come each year–winter, summer, and the rains–if during these at least I treat illnesses with seasonal medicines, would social relationships not remain intact? Would people not still say: Doctor Bhai, Doctor Bhaiya, Doctor Kaka, Doctor Baba? Of course they would.

It is this very thread that keeps social bonds tied together.

Just as in the months of Saavan and Bhado, Baba Baijnath's sacred thread draws the Kanwariyas to him, in the same way, Doctor Devnandan found himself bound.

Seeing the food grains and the firewood, Gudri lowered herself and spread out the conversation. Understanding the ways of the house, she had come carrying strips torn from a four-cubit sari to tie things together. Since bundles were needed to carry the

firewood, she had brought head-wear as well.

Gudri said to Subhadra-

“Aunt, does Doctor Babu do woman’s operations?”

Taking Gudri’s words as a joke, Subhadra remained silent, but Shila asked-

“What kind of operation?”

“What other operation? That one for children.”

“Whether for a child or for no child? An operation is made for getting a child and also for getting no child.”

“If children can be got through operations, then what use are men anyway?”

Saying this, Gudri stood up and added-

“Aunt, now people will keep coming and going. It is a working household; there will be need for all kinds of things. If nothing else, there is still the body. People’s work is done by people.”

Both husband and wife smiled and went straight towards the grove. Just as in a river current a pig needs no steps at the ghat yet moves ahead, even if it must turn and circle many times, so too is the movement of those who tend pigs. How could it be otherwise? Grazing pigs.

Seeing the five wood of sheeshan tree and the thick clusters of branches, the couple sat down with pleasure and began to chat.

Gudri said-

“Somehow, it will go on for fifteen days.”

Hulan replied-

“That itself is comfort.”

Kariya Kaka was about to rise and take his leave when he saw Kusumlall Pandit come rushing in. At once

he understood that going to the market would no longer be possible.

Turning directly to Kusumlall, Kariya Kaka said-

“Come in, come in, Pandit. There is much we need to understand from you. You know well enough that this is a working household.”

Smiling, Kusumlall replied- “Yes, that much is true.”

As he moved towards the courtyard, Kariya Kaka began thinking to himself. At least after talking for an hour, the mind settles. Even if not all matters are repeated tomorrow, when five people sit together, the time for speaking gradually finds its order. Kusumlall too belongs to such a gathering of five. And at present, his situation is even more complicated.

His wife’s hip has fractured. One son is estranged, so his claim has ended. The second son, who is a partner, works in Delhi. The daughter-in-law is in her eighth month. All three sons-in-law live away, so how can the daughters leave their own homes and look after things here? On top of this, during the paddy harvest, the wheat field was damaged along with the bullock. Yet does Kusumlall’s mind ever lose its cheer?

Setting aside his own troubles, he has informed his sons and daughters of everything. Why should any family member feel burdened with blame? Even while ill, the old woman keeps the household running. The paddy harvest has been completed. The old woman’s plaster has also been done. She will remain bound for another twenty days, after which she will begin lifting both buckets again.

Here, nothing much is broken. Elsewhere, someone’s thigh breaks, someone’s chest breaks. Do those ever fully heal? At times the restless daughter-in-law

scolds her own parents, at times her husband. The mother-in-law herself is unwell. Despite all this, Kusumlall's mind remains constantly cheerful.

When he leaves for work, sometimes he laughs at the daughter-in-law's impatience, sometimes he finds happiness in his daughter's daily life. These blankets and woollen clothes were given by his daughters and sons-in-law. Then all three sisters came and paid their respects. For treatment too, each gave five hundred. So long as there is strength in the body, so long as one can still stand...

Turning back from the courtyard, Kariya Kaka asked-

"All right, Pandit, tell me the news about your wife."

"In twenty days the plaster will come off. But right now I am in a rush, so let me speak only of work."

"You speak, then."

"The vessels for ritual duties have been measured, but the most troublesome is the weighing of curd. The work for the clay vessels will take place on the tenth or eleventh day. But the curd must be set three or four days earlier, and one day has already passed. On the fifth or sixth day, the weighing will fall due. Making the earthen pots takes three days. In the same way, pounding and drying also require three days. After that, one day will be needed for transport. Now add it all up and see, if we do not begin today, how will the work be managed?"

Kusumlall's words struck Devnandan as weighty and considered. He did not speak, but the steady nodding of his head was clearly visible. For one who was ready to listen or accept, this was enough, though Kusumlall himself did not fully realise it.

Laughing, Kariya Kaka said-

"Pandit, you too become naïve when it comes to life. Do you really think Raghu Bhai's work is something that needs to be asked about?"

"No, no, I do not think that at all. But the work is such that when four people sit together and discuss it, whatever has been missed or added comes before everyone's eyes. Now I shall go…"

Saying this, Kusumlall smiled again and added-

"The pull and strain of work has become such that it exists both inside the home and in society. All these days, all of us sat together and went on agreeing with one another. If that were to stop at this stage, what would that be like? Should one become a corpse while still alive and hide inside the house? Who has come here after driving stakes into the ground, to remain forever? So long as there is breath in the body, one continues to watch the play of this world."

Kariya Kaka interrupted him-

"Hey, you have spread such talk that I forgot what I even wanted to drink."

Kariya Kaka's gesture meant that water should be brought. But water, by its nature, always flows downward.

Devnandan called out to Asha. In the courtyard, Shila understood at once. She said to Asha-

"Child, Babuji is calling out at the doorway. Go and see, and also count how many people are there."

Asha was still counting at the corner of the doorway when Kariya Kaka saw Rajesar approaching, his head wrapped with a cloth and a bundle tied on top. Calling out loudly, Kariya Kaka said- "Come in, come in, Rajesar. Will

your tea go cold?”

Stopping a little to the side, Rajesar replied-

“Kariya Bhaiya, just as the nectar-like water of the Swati star falls into the ocean and, passing through hundreds of hands, reaches the mouth of an oyster to become a pearl, in the same way, whatever share of mine has gone elsewhere will keep circling and finally return to me.”

Raising his hand, Rajesar added- “The name of the eater is written in every grain.”

“All right, come in. You had work early this morning, did you not?”

Hearing Kariya Bhaiya’s words, Rajesar lifted his hand in refusal and said-

“Brother, I will not even tell you how much quarrelling there is in this village over the fields. People have become so sharp and cutting that even when one quarrels, there is no rest day or night. No one wants to let anyone else remain at peace for even a single minute. Inside the house and outside, everywhere it is the same bitter grind.”

“Enough of the stories. Talk about the work.”

Smiling, Rajesar said-

“Brother, why do you think differently from what is plain to see? Once one is caught in the web of attachment, ruin is bound to follow. But does that mean one abandons social duty? Just as our legs carried Raghu Bhai through life, in the same way, his final work will also be borne on our legs.”

Hearing Rajesar’s words, Devnandan was startled. These elders live with a double rhythm to life. One rhythm

is life itself; the other is life among people. It is as if the entire village is deceitful to them, and they, in turn, are deceitful to the entire village. After that, one day will be needed for transport. Now add it all up and see, if we do not begin today, how will the work be managed?.

Just then Shila arrived with a tray holding four cups of tea. Seeing only tea, Kusumlall smiled and said- "Well then, Kariya Bhaiya, this is how you understand the timing of the potter. In the time we have sat waiting for tea, we could have built several banks."

Understanding the hint, Shila placed the tray on the low stool in front of her husband and quickly went back into the courtyard. Tearing open a packet of biscuits, she returned to the doorway. Seeing the biscuits, Kariya Kaka said- "Daughter-in-law, bring water. I will distribute the biscuits."

Out of the sixteen biscuits, he gave five each to Kusumlall and Rajesar. Taking three each for himself and Devnandan, the two of them looked quietly in different directions.

As he put the salty biscuit into his mouth, Rajesar said-

"Since four in the morning I have been at work. There has not even been time to eat. But God has given food of that kind as well. The whole day passed on charcoal and water. Till ten at night, there was no chance even to pause."

After eating one biscuit and drinking a glass of water, Rajesar gestured to Shila to refill the glass and said-

"Daughter-in-law, it is the story of just one day. Share the water, and listen to the tale as well. To give

information to one man, we walked six kos. We set out at dawn and reached there around one thirty or two in the afternoon. We were tired, and hunger had set in. But the old woman there was most gracious. Honey seemed to drip from her speech. No sooner had we arrived than she signalled us to sit on her bed and began speaking about hosts and traders. My heart was burning with hunger, yet we listened with full courtesy for an hour. Then, annoyed, I said- 'It will grow dark while I am on the road. I must go.'

Then, rising suddenly, she said to her daughter-in-law, 'In any case, he has come as a barber from a kin village. If we do not offer tea or paan, how would that look?'

It occurred to me that people in these villages too have become strangers. Living in the city for so long, they have begun cutting through the web of society like mice. We drank tea, ate paan, and there decided that we would somehow quieten the stomach with a light meal. If we crossed the eastern stream before sunset, we would surely reach the village by the second or third evening watch. For expenses, she had given five rupees, while we were already faint with hunger. As soon as I stepped into the cool water of the Kamla river, I felt the urge to relieve myself. But it was only the bladder pressing. Crossing the eastern stream, we ate chickpeas and puffed rice worth three rupees in Jhanjharpur market, drank water, and only then did life return to the body."

In between, Kusumlall interrupted- "What are you wandering on about, Rajesar Bhai? Speak of the work."

Holding the tea glass in his hand after eating a biscuit and drinking water, Rajesar said to Shila-

"Daughter-in-law, if biscuits were to be served, you

should have brought water and biscuits first. Poor thing, the tea itself has already been insulted by being turned into water, and on top of that we go on adding to the disrespect."

Hearing this, Devnandan, with a faint smile, said-

"In the world of insult, even a greater insult has its own dignity."

Seeing the drift of the conversation, Kariya Kaka changed its course and said-

"Daughter-in-law, do not give Rajesar tea in a glass like you would give to a labourer. Give it in a proper cup. All right, Rajesar, will the ritual work be done in the grove today?"

Seeing his work coming to the fore, Rajesar replied-

"Brother, what should I say of today's matter. Such shameless women have begun roaming the villages that one feels like wishing they would simply drop dead, so that one might be spared from such people."

"What happened?"

"What do you mean, what happened. First, there was no sleep at night. It was around eleven or twelve. A fire broke out in Gopla's house. It took two hours to put it out. My whole body got smeared with ash and mud. Washing and cleaning took me till three in the morning. When I finally lay down, today's tasks came to mind. I have to cut the hair of the untouchable. I have to go to the priest and the patron to give news. On top of that, the day before yesterday Jugesra had told me to trim the hair properly and also go with the wedding party."

Kariya Kaka interrupted-

"But where is the wedding season now?"

Rajesar replied-

“Brother, what age are you speaking of? Do people who marry in courts look at the auspicious time? And besides, is Jugesra even getting married, or is he just performing a chumavan?”

“What kind of bride is she?”

“That is the limit, brother. The word ‘girl’ is used for a small child as well as for a woman who comes to live in her husband’s house. Jugesra is on his third, and the bride is on her fourth.”

“They both seem to be birds of the same flight.”

“Brother, human beings have all kinds of traits. Even a tame bird learns to fly, and a wild bird can be caught and turned into a pet.”

Holding the tea glass, Rajesar said to Shila-

“Daughter-in-law, Aunt knows everything already. Just tell her my name. She will take care of the offerings. Until the ritual feasts are done, worship will continue in the grove.”

Shila went into the courtyard and told her mother-in-law. Seeing everyone fall silent at the doorway, Rajesar began speaking to Devnandan-

“Doctor Sahib, my work, the barber’s work, begins from the very first day. And it is double work. On one side, arranging the leaf offerings for the ritual of worship; on the other, cutting the hair of those from the kathiyari side, starting early in the morning. That itself is one set of duties. If there is only one function in the village, it is manageable. But when it becomes double or triple, the work too becomes double and triple. On top of that, birth rituals and purification rites keep coming separately.

For days I have been thinking that if only I could place a plough at my door, even that would be hard to maintain. Here, in the śrāddha rites, I am entitled to only a six anna share. Beyond that, there is a little extra now and then: old dhotis, earthen vessels, and some casual handouts.”

Hearing Rajesar’s words, Devnandan felt a quiet chill spread within him. He lifted his eyes and looked at Kariya Kaka. Kariya Kaka was watching Rajesar’s face, as if waiting for a rasgulla to drop so that he might catch it. The sweet itself did not come, but its syrup surely did.

Smiling, he said-

“Raje, who on this earth is more honest than the one who works the hardest for others and keeps his own life going with the least? Is not honesty itself one path of dharma?”

Within himself, Devnandan resolved that carrying forward his father’s duties was his own responsibility. Whatever work there might be, its good and bad would fall upon him. Whatever happens in the village happens. But in his own house, he would not allow such injustice to take place.

Then a doubt arose in his mind. How was this matter to be explained to the elders? The word purbaashay means intention rooted in the past, but what about what remains lodged in the ears of most people in society? How should that be understood?

As varied arguments rose in his mind, he reflected that there exists a working relationship between the two parties, the priest and the barber. When the labour is shared, its result should also be shared. But how much sharing, and on what basis? That is something only the

two of them can decide. Whatever decision they reach together, why should he object? Yet his mind remained unsettled.

On the fourth day, after the ritual feast in the grove, the rites were completed. Shankardev had already taken his meal there. Kariya Kaka, holding a spade in his hand, walked ahead, followed by Shankardev, Devnandan, and behind them all the members of the family–the three brothers and sisters, the mother-in-law, and the daughter-in-law–as they entered the courtyard.

As soon as they stepped inside, everyone felt as if Raghunandan himself had arrived before them. The house and homestead he had built, the hand pump for water, everything was there. It was as though his presence lingered within every object. If his house were turned into a memorial, they would come every day to pay their respects there.

Remembering his father inwardly, Devnandan took a resolve. Whatever his father had given belonged to this society. As for himself, he earned just enough that he scarcely even found time to return to the village. His daughter would go to her in-laws. His son would take up a job somewhere else. Should the property handed down by his forefathers be carried away elsewhere? Then people from the village might go off to other places and manage their own advancement, but the village itself would be left behind like stagnant water in a ditch. How long could that go on? If the two millstones were to turn together like those of a flour mill, would the wheat not be ground into flour? Of course it would.

From the income of his father's property, he would organise a communal meal and, from his own side, on the

day of his father's death, gift books worth five thousand rupees and medicines worth five thousand rupees to poor children of the village. Yet the happier thought was this: if it could be given every year on his father's birth date, those children would grow up playing together day after day. Why should his death be understood only as the death of the body? But then his birth date would not be known. He had never gone to school. So what was to be done?

As a new enthusiasm rose within him, Doctor Devnandan said to Kariya Kaka-

"Kaka, all of you are of one voice and have seen far more than I have. Let us sit now itself and think through the next rites. Shankar Bhai is here as well."

Hearing Devnandan's words, Shankardev thought of his own earnings. A quiet thrill rose within him. Spitting out the betel juice, he said-

"Why not? Everything has just been wrapped up, and it will take time to gather things again. Besides, Kariya Kaka has fed us so insistently that one feels like resting."

Hearing his cheerfulness, in Kariya Kaka's eyes Raghunandan seemed to rise and dance again. He remembered sitting on the ridge of the field, talking and chewing tobacco. He remembered songs of virtue. Chhitan from those days was still with them. He remembered society itself. Today, that same society had come together to bid farewell to their brother. Was it right that from the village to distant places, one should feed only one's own caste and not even look towards the children of that wider society–those who remain close at hand in times of need–leaving them weeping?

The happiness he had felt at Shankardev's words

was overtaken by a deeper ache. He said- “When the work has been measured within thirteen days, then it is necessary that society be used to the fullest. I will call Sundar Bhai and bring him.”

Saying this, Kariya Kaka was about to leave when Devnandan stopped him-

“You have come carrying the spade. I will send Asha.”

Hearing this, Kariya Kaka laughed and said-

“Doctor Sahib, what will Asha go and say?”

“She will say it.”

“Say what?”

Devnandan fell silent. Kariya Kaka said-

“If Bhai thinks it will be some small matter, then he will come after managing his larger work. That is why I will go myself.”

As soon as Kariya Kaka took his leave, Shankardev said to Dayanand-

“Father, give me a pot of water to drink. I too belong to your family in some way. I also went to your maternal family’s wedding feast. You people are becoming migrants now. I still remember that three days before the sacred thread ceremony we ate rice and lentils, fried vegetables, curd, and sugar. We too stand upon your family’s grain.”

After drinking water, he continued-

“Now there are only two of us, so I am saying this. Performing rituals has slowly pushed our family downward. I speak plainly. From Rajbiraj to three kos beyond, Father was a patron to many households. Whenever he went to that region, he would stay away for

a month or more, as if in a foreign land. He was well served there. There was never any lack of food or drink. I myself have not travelled beyond here to Nepal.

You see, we are only slightly set apart. Otherwise, as one moves northward, there would be more speaking and shouting, more mingling of farming and trade. Stories, kinship ties, feasts, and rituals keep moving back and forth across the border. People from this side go to markets on that side, and those from that side come here. But as one goes further north, one begins to notice differences in water and speech. The reason for that is the northern hills.

Father had a good income. He would spend whole days sitting at the doorway, eating bhang and playing cards. It took him eleven years to study the Laghu Siddhant. But by accompanying Father, I learned all the skills of livelihood. The middle brother was sharp in studies. He studied well and now has a good job. He told the patrons clearly that he wanted nothing to do with ritual patronage. He would work with his hands and eat the grain earned through labour. That would strengthen the upbringing of his children.

The youngest one has gone astray. Brother in Delhi did get a job, but earns so little that it barely fills his stomach. Still, he has built a reputation in society."

On hearing the word reputation, Dayanand felt puzzled. On one side it was said that he had gone astray, and on the other that he was reputable. With surprise rising in his mind, he looked straight into Shankardev's eyes and asked- "What reputation?"

Taking Dayanand's question lightly, Shankardev said- "Son, even today those who can afford to feed many

are considered respectable. For a long time, this respect came through feasts and rituals. Now it has entered every household. How much money one spends on food has itself become a measure of standing. Even if a family spends a thousand rupees a day on its own meals, when people from society arrive at the gate, either they are not welcomed in at all, or if they are, they are told after a few polite questions that the wife is on duty at her job and serving tea in the house is difficult. The poor visitor is left not knowing what to say. There is neither true meeting of lives nor any shared space.

Yes, I was speaking of my brother. For a year now, he has become a mahant. I have not seen it myself, but I hear of it, and he has written about it more than once in his letters. Otherwise, he is not one to set fires. For eight or nine months, he has been sending clothes and a thousand rupees every month. But there is one trouble. Almost a year has passed. His wife is still here. There is no child. I called him and said- come to the village for ten days and give blessings for children. Now you have become a mahant."

Turning towards Devnandan, Shankardev smiled and said-

"Brother, do you know what reply he gave? He said that his place has already been entered in the records. He may stay anywhere day and night, but at dawn and dusk the bell must ring and the aarti must be sung. And now devotees too have begun to arrive. From women of the village households to people from the market, crowds keep coming all the time."

Devnandan said-

"Then send Sister-in-law there as well."

Shankardev replied- “He himself writes that I should perform the farewell rites and bring her there. But one trouble never comes alone. Trouble has piled upon trouble. First, Sister-in-law herself does not want to go. How can one forcefully send her away from home? And that is not the only matter, there is another.

Once, during the Biha Panchami festival, she went to Janakpur with her maternal companions. There was such a crush of people, travellers moving day and night from here to there. At one point, in an open area, the electricity went off. Everywhere people lost their companions and disappeared into the crowd. Our Sister-in-law too was lost. Listen to this. On the very day she was lost, neither did the villagers find her, nor did she find the villagers. But she was not truly lost; she was simply carried away. All the travellers were from nearby regions. She met companions from her grandmother’s village. Just as people cross a river holding on to bamboo or rope, so the poor woman, moving from one household of kin to another, returned to the village after seven days. That fear has not left her mind.”

Watching his expression, Devnandan asked-

“Everyone says women wish to go to the city. Are you saying the opposite?”

Smiling, Shankardev said-

“Ah, brother. You are speaking like an innocent yourself. As long as one lives in Mithilanchal, in this region, people can live their lives speaking Maithili and feel rooted. But in a place where there is distance of language and distance of life ways, can one change one’s life seven times like a chameleon? As for means of living, tell me this: in the place where people live, is there no

need for production of things? Do we not need education and medicine, food and clothing? Do we not need recreation and art and culture? But who will do all this? Those who have it wander the cities with their wives. Does Ram return straight to Ayodhya just because one calls the land sacred? Leave the world aside for now. Look first at the work that lies before us."

"Yes, before Kariya Kaka and Sundar Kaka arrive, let me say one more thing. From Rajbiraj to three kos northwards, my father had many patron households. In people's minds, the importance of funeral rites was once very high. That meant the income was good as well. Life was not scattered as it is now. People were more trusting. One did not cheat another merely by sight. Father would leave his goods, vessels, and clothes wherever he went. Of course, the family needed many clothes, yet he lived with a kind of quiet dignity. When he died, trouble seized us from all sides. My brother said he would take a job. He took his family and left. Now he comes like a guest when there is work. The younger one we have spoken of already. He has become a constable of the village guards. I hear that all day long he entertains women with tales learned at his grandmother's place."

"Anyway, do something. My own forehead is not carved in stone. Now what has happened is that all castes in Allapur have begun performing their own worship. Patronage has declined. Seeing Allapur, the villages across the border have started doing the same. Slowly only five villages remain. Even so, new patrons have increased now, Marwaris as well. The party with money."

In between, Devnandan asked- "Have they abandoned their own ways?"

"They have their own traditions. But here, everyone

has become a trader. Where is ritual devotion now? Once, offer betel leaf. Seeing the village games and festivities makes the heart ache. Yet when one sees cheap glitter on people's lips, anger rises. Still, silence is best. I speak nothing, and I say nothing to anyone."

Placing betel in his mouth, chewing for a while, then spitting out the red juice, Shankardev spoke again,

"Brother, for six months now we have been bent low. But seeing the state and direction of disputes among kin, it feels that God still looks upon us."

Devnandan asked quietly- "What do you mean by that?"

At the words "what do you mean," Shankardev began-

"Brother Sahib, everyone has chosen such a path that their worries have been eased. The middle brother, who has a job, came forcefully to the village again and again and took both of us along with him. What could we say? We too understand that livelihood is shrinking day by day. We have lived all our lives among people, so where would we go at this age? As long as society lives, one somehow keeps floating along.

He did not say it to my face, but my wife shared her feelings with me. 'Eating barren land again and again makes everything barren. Will people not mock me, saying the father was a great officer and the son and nephews are not fit even to sign a paper?' Saying this, he took both brothers with him and got our names written in the schools run by the officers.

The youngest brother keeps calling all the time, saying, 'I am so overwhelmed with followers that I do not know where to keep them. Pick them up and take them

away.' But there is fear of travelling by vehicle. There is so much snatching and looting now that it would take thirty hours just to reach Delhi sitting in a bus. Even so, he keeps sending so many things from here and there that nothing is lacking.

Contentment has grown to this point: that when others perform their father's and mother's rites, why should we create noise and spectacle? Our ancestors performed funeral rites of three kinds according to their means. Each did rites in keeping with what he could afford and at least offered a pot of water to the ancestors. But there is deceit among people. If one performs rites, they should be done with devotion. Otherwise, even after cheating, the offering does not truly reach the ancestors. That is how we did it too.

Disputes among kin still continue, which keeps the direction of life unsettled. In the village there is Vedanti Kaka. The poor man has shaped his life in his own way. He teaches in the lower primary school of the village, but his conduct is entirely his own. Just as a farmer divides his work into two stretches–from morning till noon and from two in the afternoon till sunset–in the same way he teaches in two stretches at school. Whether he receives his salary or not does not trouble him. Some clerks in offices cheat and eat, some in banks do the same. Sometimes naked bodies come begging for books and notebooks for their children. Sometimes rogues surround banks from all sides. But Kaka never raises his head to ask for accounts, nor does he ever ask anything of anyone.

His mind remains strong. He believes that since he himself is alive, what is the point of storing life away inside the house? In the month of Kartik, he sits at a

sacred place and recites the Kartik Mahatmya to society for seven days every year. From that, enough cloth comes that both husband and wife wear hand-spun clothes all year without a needle touching them. He keeps a cow for milk. He does not farm himself. In the village he has only a small orchard plot and the house land. His father performed priestly patronage. Whatever land and mango trees the patrons donated in the villages still bring in just enough that rice for two or three years remains as provisions. His habits are such that he never asks anything from anyone. He is not like today's boys who say, 'Grandpa, give me some tobacco.'"

He grows fifty plants of betel leaf with his own hands and understanding. Kaki remains busy behind the cow. Just as one sister loosens and combs another sister's hair and shares good and bad talk, in the same way she stays with the cow. Just as he grows betel leaf with his own hands, he also prepares the lime himself. When the eyes of his kin fall upon him, their gaze lowers on its own.

But there is another household where, in the same courtyard by the house, three brothers live with their wives and children. As soon as morning comes, the three of them begin a Mahabharata. All three daughters-in-law belong to different regions. One is from Allapur, another from Bhauar, and the third from across the Ganga in the Magadh region. When all three begin singing abusive songs in three different tones, it becomes hard to tell whether one is in Vrindavan or in Lanka's Ashoka garden.

Smiling, he said-

"How much more should I say, brother. I feel ashamed myself. There is a lad, thin as a reed, with hair left hanging like a mop. Every day he trims his moustache

and beard. He wears a stitched shirt tight to the chest and narrow, close-fitting pyjamas clinging to his legs. Once I saw him on some work and said- perhaps in jest, 'Who are you really?' What he muttered in response was like throwing a stone onto a wasp nest, murmuring something without sense or direction. Of all that he said- one thing struck hardest. He said that human worth has dried up somewhere."

But then laughter burst from my mouth and I went on-

"Lift your eyes and look, brother, and you will see that everything has come floating in like old debris. Such strange offshoots have been born that one cannot tell whether they will cut off the nose and the ears of the lineage, or turn the homestead into a field of weeds. There is one kinsman whose height might be four feet and his breadth the same. A full basket of flattened rice and half a measure of curd disappears down his throat in a single gulp. The chura and curd cling to his greedy belly so that his stomach is always swollen. His house collapsed. After much pleading, he was given an Indira housing grant. Take note, he swallowed that too, and now lives on khichdi. How much more should I say, brother?"

At that moment Kariya Kaka arrived, bringing Sundar Kaka with him. Just then, Lelaha also came carrying an axe and said to Kariya Kaka-

"Now it has been three days of rest for spade, axe, and sickle. Will we stop now or not? The firewood still has to dry within seven days."

Hearing Lelaha, Kariya Kaka remained silent. But Sundar Kaka cut in before Lelaha could finish-

"Kariya, go and call Padhua Bhai. In the village, he is

the one who does the most twists and turns."

Hearing Sundar Kaka, Kariya Kaka left to fetch Padhua Bhai. From the moment Lelaha heard the words "twists and turns" from Sundar Kaka's mouth, his mind began to itch to understand their meaning. Yet, hearing talk of work, he kept his question pressed inside his belly. Still, it churned there, waiting to come out.

As Kariya Kaka walked only a bamboo ahead, Lelaha asked-

"Sundar Kaka, what do twists and turns mean?"

Hearing Lelaha's question, Sundar Kaka's stomach began to rumble, but before his anger could rise, Shankardev stepped in and steadied the moment. He said-

"Devnandan Bhai, Lelaha is one of the pillars of society. Poor fellow, at this age, how could his body be so feeble at this age? You see how, just as in the Kosi floods young banana groves and saplings are stripped bare, in the same way his body's bones shine through like dry, leafless branches. What is society? What is a house called society? A house of society is one in which everything is shared. Now the question arises, there are many kinds of work piled upon work. What should be understood as society's work? The answer to that lies in the process of development. But the fundamental truth is this: since all human beings are human, the joys and sorrows of all must be shared."

Hearing Shankardev's words, Sundar Kaka flared up. Just as froth sinks down inside a palm wine pot the moment heat touches it, words began spilling from his mouth-

"Lelahu, you people forget everything at once, but I

still remember matters that go back generations. Did you not see, at Shyamsundar Mai’s funeral feast, how the invitees of twenty-five villages abused from the doorway right into the courtyard? And who was behind it? That same Padhua Bhai. He coaxed the cook, made him drink ganja, and then started playing the leading role. When it came time to add salt to the vegetables and lentils, he simply upturned the basket and dumped it in.”

Hearing this, Lelaha burst into laughter and said-

“Yes, Kaka, I understood that later too.”

“Damn it, he is such a troublemaker that that alone was enough. You must have seen how he caused quarrels at Pulkit’s daughter’s wedding. Someone else was performing the rituals, and right in the middle he criticised the veiled bride’s sari. At his words, women and men alike rose into a quarrel. In the end, you saw what happened. That is why one must stay alert around such crooked-minded people. There is no telling what they might do next. People like that do not even understand that their work is meant for others also. They are always busy grabbing another’s share. Our family pandit is sitting here. Let him speak on this matter”

Hearing Sundar Bhai’s question, Shankardev did not explode. Instead, he replied with ease-

“Look, until some days ago, my ways were the same. But I have given all that up now. What do I gain by gossiping and scheming against others? At best, one learns to beware of what is false. But now I feel that in the time it takes to guard against the false, why not make the genuine even more genuine?

Sundar Bhai, the day brothers began marking the

homestead of lineage, all sorrows started from there. Until some days ago, I too used to give examples of other people's funeral rites and extract more from patrons. But I have given all that up. Everyone has lifted his own burden, and so I have stepped aside as well. Now I understand this: as long as someone performs rites for his own parents, why should I press him? From the day my thinking changed, life too changed. Abuse began to be heard less.

Those worthless calves were castrated and turned into bulls, ruining the cowsheds completely. Because of that, neither good calves nor good heifers remained in the village. The orchards and fields are filled with roaming bulls. People would constantly shout names and curse aloud, saying, 'Here comes Shankar Baba.' But it must be protected. As new people have come, new kinds of work have also begun. It is through their very blessings that such fine cows and milk-giving cattle have come into the village. New machines too have started arriving."

In between, Devnandan said to Dayanand-

"Son, tea or water..."

Dayanand went into the courtyard and spoke to his mother. Meanwhile, Kariya Kaka arrived with Padhua Kaka. Shankardev signalled to Padhua Kaka to sit beside him. But Lelaha's mind was still turning over his earlier thought. Once, he had caught hold of a lizard on a tree. As long as he held its body, the lizard stayed in his hand. But the moment he grabbed its tail, it slipped away. Only the tail remained in his grasp.

Afterwards, doubt crept into Lelaha's own eyes. Sometimes he rubbed his left eye, sometimes his right. Still, his mind refused to settle, was Padhua Kaka

someone deep and sincere, or only clever on the surface? Yet his thinking shifted. When one sits among five people, it is better to speak less of oneself and listen more to others.

Tea arrived. Everyone began drinking. Setting his cup down, Padhua Kaka looked toward Shankardev and said-

“Brother, what is left of those earlier days now? Once, everyone came together joyfully for feasts and rituals, and ate together as one. Now, merchants from Darbhanga come and take full charge of funeral rites and weddings.”

Hearing this, Shankardev replied-

“I speak only for myself. The giver believes he has donated utensils worth a thousand rupees. But am I to eat broken scraps in my house? I bring utensils from elsewhere and sell them cheaply in the shops. On paper, it appears a lot was received, but how much really comes into our hands? That’s when I began to understand that a human life is meant to uphold human dignity. Firm resolve demands both hardship and steadiness. But we’ve become greedy for the stomach alone. For the sake of our small stomach, we’ve ruined everything. No one reveals his own failure and dishonor. So I say this, let the five of us think together before taking the next step.”

Everyone discussed and agreed on the way forward: First, the rites would be performed according to the wishes of the household head, the karta. Branding weak calves to turn them into bulls would be avoided. Second, instead of feeding outsiders or professional feast-goers, the people of the village–all castes, men and women alike–would be fed. Relatives, friends, and kin from other

villages could attend as they wished.

At the end, Devnandan said- “Just as my father’s body has perished but his soul remains, in the same way, year after year we will continue to do, as far as we can, acts of welfare in his name.”

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Notes